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What do secondary-aged young people and their parents find supportive? An Appreciative Inquiry

Going back to school following a period of extended school non-attendance: What do secondary-aged young people and their parents find supportive? An Appreciative Inquiry

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Abstract

‘Extended school non-attendance’ (ENSA) in young people (YP) is thought to have individual, social and economic effects for YP, families, schools and communities. ESNA is linked with interference with YP’s social relationships and academic performance (King & Bernstein, 2001) and increased risk of unemployment and mental health difficulties in adulthood (Fremont, 2003; McShane, Walter, & Rey, 2001).There is little evidence to suggest that punitive universal methods for encouraging school attendance in YP are effective (Zhang, 2004) and there appears to be a paucity of research which focuses on more individualised approaches based on the experiences of YP and their parents.

The present study used Appreciative Inquiry to explore the perceptions of secondary-aged YP, who had experienced a period of ESNA, and their parents, in relation to what they had found helpful in supporting a return to school, and what they would like to see implemented for others in the future. It was hoped that, from this, further practical support for ESNA could be developed. Four semi-structured interviews were conducted with two YP and three parents. Thematic analysis was used to identify five themes from interview data. The findings of the current study offer an in-depth understanding of the importance of trusting relationships in situations of ESNA and suggest that these underpin other aspects of support perceived to be helpful. Findings also suggest that notions of ‘success’ in cases of ESNA should encompass the emotional well-being of YP. Based on the findings of the study, an appreciative model of support was developed. This represents factors which may support YP to return to school following ESNA, and factors which may support parents in situations of ESNA. This model is discussed alongside implications of the research for Educational Psychologists, schools, Local Authorities and researchers, and recommendations for future research are made.

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Author’s declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Overview of the research

Using the first two stages of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), the current study aimed to identify what secondary-aged young people (YP), and their parents, perceived was helpful in supporting YP to return to school following a period of extended school non-attendance (ESNA), a situation of 'long-term low' or 'non-attendance' at school (How, 2015). It was hoped that findings from the current research would contribute information towards developing further practical support for extended school non-attenders and their parents. Four semi-structured interviews were conducted; two with YP and two with parents, to find out about what they perceived was supportive in their situations and what they would like to see implemented for others in the future. Data gathered from interviews was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis. Findings of the study provide unique insights into the perceptions of individual YP who have experienced ESNA, and their parents, and suggest that the development of trusting relationships between these YP, parents and others underpinned support perceived to be helpful. This chapter will provide an overview of why I chose this research topic, its importance in the field of Educational Psychology, the context of the study and a consideration of definitions of school non-attendance. I will conclude with a summary of the chapters included within the study.

1.2 The importance of this research for Educational Psychology

Educational Psychologists (EPs) are concerned with supporting the effective social inclusion of YP at risk of exclusion (DfEE, 2000). It seems apt therefore that research in the field of Educational Psychology should focus on ways in which YP can be included within the school setting and wider society. The British Psychological Society (BPS) (2017) suggest that EPs have an important role to play in supporting YP experiencing difficulties with attendance, including through assessment, the use of evidence-based intervention, monitoring and supporting student engagement with education. Moreover, Carroll (2015) suggests that EPs have the knowledge and skills necessary for working with YP who are absent from school due to their grounding in theories of child and cognitive development, knowledge of school systems, and

knowledge about the behaviour of groups and individuals. EPs can work systemically and holistically, with family, school and Local Authority (LA) systems, to promote change by opening the minds of individuals to what they can do (Hughesman, 2004). The current research hoped to contribute knowledge towards developing the practice of EPs, schools and LAs in order that YP and their parents could be even better supported in situations of ESNA.

1.3 Choice of research area

This research was carried out as part of the three-year doctoral training course in Educational Psychology at the University of Bristol. The research was conducted during years two and three of training during my placement in a south of England LA. The reasons for choosing to focus on ESNA using Appreciative Inquiry were two-fold. Firstly, my past experiences informed my decision. Prior to training to become an EP I worked in a community centre in North-West London with YP and families from disadvantaged backgrounds. Experience with YP and parents facing challenges in relation to school attendance in this context acted as a key driver for the current research. I became aware of the difficulties these groups faced and felt powerless to make a difference. During my two-year placement within a LA context, I also worked with several YP defined as 'school refusers' and learnt about their experiences through individual conversations with them. For me, a professional attempting to meet the needs of individuals, these experiences highlighted that the systems set up to support YP and parents in situations of ESNA seemed to adopt a universal 'one size fits all' approach. This approach did not seem to be differentiated based on individual need and failed to acknowledge the depth and complexity of individual experience. Through this research, I anticipated exploring individual experiences of support for ESNA in order that more individualised approaches could potentially be developed.

Secondly, my values and beliefs informed the way in which I conducted the research. I believe that listening to the voices of YP and parents is fundamental for informing intervention and practice. I align myself with a constructivist epistemology which assumes that the views of others are subjectively important. Moreover, my belief in promoting positive change using strengths-based approaches in psychology

influenced my decision to focus on supportive aspects of experience and to take an appreciative approach to the research. Further details of these values will be outlined in section 3.5.

1.4 The national and local context of the research

1.4.1 National context

The Department for Education (DfE) report that one in ten YP enrolled in state funded primary and secondary schools were 'persistently absent' from school in 2017 (DfE, 2018), meaning that, according to the DfE's definition of 'persistent absence', one in ten YP missed 10% or more of their school sessions each term (DfE, 2018). Secondary schools are reported to have a slightly higher rate of 'persistent absence' than primary schools (DfE, 2018) and, for this reason, the current research focused on secondary-aged YP. The implications of YP's 'persistent absence' from school include economic, social and psychological risks for YP, families and communities. An identified link between 'persistent absence' and 'falling behind' academically has accentuated a political focus on raising school attendance (Pennick, 2012).

UK policy and guidance highlights that different parties are responsible for ensuring good school attendance. Section 7 of the Education Act (1996) holds parents legally responsible for ensuring their child's attendance at school and the DfE (2015i) outline the legal penalties parents may face in situations of their child's poor attendance. Schools and LAs are also responsible for ensuring YP have access to full-time education and are expected to promote good attendance and act early to address patterns of absence (DfE, 2016). However, following the School Funding Reform (DfE, 2011) and the changing socio-political climate in the UK, there has been a reduction in LA based support for attendance, and schools now hold greater responsibility for ensuring good attendance amongst their students. Within this context, it seems important to identify what parents and YP find supportive in situations of ESNA, in order that schools and LAs can further develop good practice. There is little evidence that the use of universal punitive methods, such as parental prosecution and the issuing of penalty fines, improves school attendance (Zhang, 2004) and there appears to be a paucity of research which focuses on more

individualised approaches to support based on the experiences of YP and their parents. This seems surprising given the legal emphasis on parental responsibility, and policy which suggests that YP should be consulted about matters which affect them. In light of this context, I chose to investigate what YP and their parents found supportive in situations of ESNA by interviewing YP who had returned to school after a period of ESNA, and their parents. It was hoped that, from this, the research would identify factors which supported these YP to return to school following ESNA.

1.4.2 Local context

The Local Authority in which the research was conducted had experienced a reduction in LA-based support for ESNA at the time the research was carried out. This meant that the Education Welfare Service, who had previously provided support for extended school non-attenders and their families, had been disbanded and replaced by the County Attendance Team, a team of two individuals whose statutory role included issuing penalty notices and prosecuting parents. Schools were able to purchase additional time from the County Attendance Team through their 'Traded Services' to support extended school non-attenders. However, this purchasing was largely dependent on school budgets, and the diminished capacity of the team meant that support for extended school non-attenders was less accessible than it had been previously. The Educational Psychology Service (EPS) in the LA was also offering a reduced service to schools. Having previously provided on-going support through link work whereby Educational Psychologists (EPs) regularly visited and supported schools, EPs in the LA were no longer providing this support and were only visiting schools for statutory assessments. This resulted in a further lack of support for extended school non-attenders and their parents from the EPS who had previously offered on-going support to YP and schools.

1.5 Conceptualising and defining school non-attendance

Although the Department for Education (DfE, 2018) define YP as 'persistently absent' from school if they miss 10% or more of their school sessions per term, it is important to note that this threshold has shifted over the last five years, suggesting changing definitions of what constitutes 'good attendance.' The literature on ESNA also

presents a range of conceptualisations and definitions of school 'non-attendance' and these seem to vary between individuals and across professional groups. The term 'extended school non-attendance' (ESNA) (Pellegrini, 2007) has been chosen for the current study to refer to situations of 'long-term low' or 'non-attendance' at school (How, 2015). The use of this term aims to refer to non-attendance behaviour neutrally and account for a range of possible influencing factors, without prior assumption about the experiences of others. Chapter 2 will present a critical consideration of the terminology used in the context of ESNA.

1.6 Research questions

The research questions used for the current study aimed to reflect my interest in finding out about what secondary-aged YP, and their parents, perceived was helpful in supporting a return to school following ESNA. I also hoped to identify what YP and parents would like to see implemented in the future, with the aim of contributing information towards developing further practical support for extended school non-attenders and their parents. Based on the first two stages of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), I wanted to find out about the 'best of what was' and the 'best of what might be' in situations of ESNA. The questions developed to reflect these aims were:

1) What do secondary-aged young people, who have returned to school following a period of extended school non-attendance, and their parents, perceive was helpful in supporting young people to return to school?

2) What do these secondary-aged young people, and their parents, perceive to be desirable support for extended school non-attenders and their parents and what would they like to see implemented in the future?

1.7 Structure of the thesis

The research has been divided into distinct chapters to aid the reader's navigation. An overview of the study's remaining structure is outlined below in Table 1:

	Chapter	Content
2	Literature Review	Chapter 2 provides a critical consideration of the literature in the context of ESNA. I consider; the terminology used to define and conceptualise ESNA, research relating to the factors associated with ESNA and interventions used to support school attendance following ESNA, including research which has considered the voices of YP and parents in this context.
3	Methodology	This chapter begins by outlining the methodological approach taken to the research. The research design, data collection methods and details of data analysis are also outlined, including the ethical considerations associated with each of these research stages.
4	Findings	Findings from the thematic analysis of interviews with YP and parents are presented. The five themes identified from the data are explored.
5	Discussion	The findings are discussed in the context of the existing literature and an appreciative model of support is presented. The chapter also identifies the strengths and limitations of the research and its implications for schools, EPs and LAs. Directions for future research are also suggested.
6	Conclusion	The research is summarised, and its original contribution is highlighted. The quality of the research is considered according to quality

		criteria and my reflexive account of the research process is outlined.
7	References	References are presented in Chapter 7
8	Appendices	Appendices are presented in Chapter 8

Table 1: Overview of the structure of the thesis

I will offer summaries of content throughout the thesis to support the reader's navigation of chapters and clarify pertinent points.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Aims of the review

This chapter aims to offer a critical review of the literature relating to 'extended school non-attendance' (ESNA) to set the context of the current research and provide a rationale for it. The review aims to critically evaluate the terminology used in relation to school non-attendance, associated factors presented in the literature and the methods used to promote school attendance in young people (YP) with attendance difficulties. The review will also explore the extent to which the perspectives of YP and parents with experience of ESNA have been included in the literature, especially in relation to what these groups perceive to be important in supporting a young person's return to school following ESNA.

2.2 A systematic approach to reviewing the literature

To establish what is currently known about ESNA and identify possible gaps in the literature, a systematic search was conducted in November 2017. Prior to this systematic search, a preliminary explorative search to identify terminology relevant to the search was conducted via Google Scholar. The terms 'school refusal' and 'school refusal terminology' were entered into Google Scholar and different terms used were noted down. Following this, the systematic search was conducted. The systematic search combined search terms which focused on three areas:

1) 'school refusal', which encompassed the terms; 'school refusal', 'school non-attendance', 'extended non-attendance', 'school avoidance' and 'school absenteeism'
2) 'experiences', which encompassed the terms; 'experiences', 'perceptions', 'attitudes', 'views' and 'perspectives'
3) 'support', which encompassed the terms; 'intervention', 'reintegration', 'return to school', 'support', 'recommendation' and 'help'

These areas were searched for in combination, using the directive 'and' within databases to search for articles which focused on 'school refusal', 'experiences' and 'support'. A table of the search terms used can be found in Appendix 1. Due to the

volume of research which exists in the field of school attendance, a number of databases were searched to identify relevant articles. The following databases were searched for peer-reviewed journals, dissertations and theses; PsycINFO, ERIC (Educational Resources Information Centre); British Education Index, Child Development and Adolescent Studies; Education Abstracts; Teacher Reference Center; EthOS (Electronic Theses Online Service); and Google Scholar. Some individual journals were also searched including; Education Psychology in Practice (EPiP), British Journal of Educational Psychology, Educational Psychology Review and Psychology in the Schools. The Department for Education (DfE) website was also searched. This search identified government guidance for schools, local authorities and parents in relation to attendance and detailed national school absence statistics.

Once search terms had been inputted into the above databases, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to identify articles relevant for inclusion in the literature review. Articles which were deemed relevant for inclusion in the review were those which focused on 'school refusal', YP who were of school age (5-18 years old), and those which had been conducted in an educational context after the year 2000. Articles which focused upon YP who were not attending school on medical grounds or due to exclusion by schools were not deemed appropriate for inclusion, alongside those which focused on YP who were 'inpatients' as part of clinical groups. The key studies selected for the review also considered the experiences and perceptions of YP and their parents in relation to school non-attendance and interventions for ESNA. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems framework was also used during selection to consider the connected systems around a young person and their family, which may support intervention and a return to school. A full list of inclusion and exclusion criteria applied to articles can be found in Appendix 2.

Initially, only studies based in the United Kingdom (UK) were selected for inclusion in the review, with the hope of identifying research relevant for a UK educational context. However, this seemed to exclude important research, and inclusion criteria were widened to include research from Australia, the US, Canada, New Zealand and Europe, locations which were deemed to have similar education systems to the UK. Additional relevant papers which met the inclusion criteria were identified from the

reference lists of studies through ‘snowball reviewing’, an approach adapted by Sullivan (2010) from Bryman (2016) to support the systematic review. Some papers from before the year 2000 which emerged from snowball reviewing also seemed relevant for setting the context of the literature in this field, for example, Belsky’s (1981) model of mutual family influences and Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979), and so were included for this purpose. The CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme) Qualitative Research Checklist (2013) and Tracy’s (2010) quality criteria were used to assess the worthiness, rigour, credibility, transparency and significant contribution of research papers. The literature search was repeated in June 2018. One additional newly published paper was identified as relevant for inclusion. Research published after June 2018 has not been included in the current review.

The first sections of the chapter will outline the importance of school attendance, highlighting that a range of negative outcomes are linked with attendance difficulties in YP. The range of terminology used to contextualise and describe school non-attendance will then be critically considered and my decision to use the term ‘extended school non-attendance’ (ESNA) for the current research will be justified. Due to the range of terminology identified in the literature, when referring to the research of others, the terminology adopted by the authors will be used in quotation marks. Following this, the dominant theories in which studies about ESNA are situated will be described to provide context for the research. Factors associated with, and interventions for, ESNA will then be considered. The chapter will end with a critical consideration of the voices of YP and parents in relation to intervention and support for ESNA. Nine articles which focused upon the views and perceptions of YP and parents in relation to support for ESNA were identified. These articles, selected because they focused on what YP and parents deemed to be supportive, seemed most pertinent in relation to the aims of the current research and will be critically considered.

2.3 The importance of school attendance

Societal and political interest in school attendance is thought to stem from an emphasis on the capacity to read and write as prerequisites for democracy (Reid,

2012) and a focus on the link between school absence and poor outcomes for YP. In the UK, YP are legally required to attend school between the ages of five and sixteen and parents of school-aged children are legally responsible for ensuring their child receives an efficient full-time education, whether this be at school or through home education (Education Act, 1996).

It is thought that the impact of not being at school is likely to have individual, social and economic effects. In the short term, being out of school has been linked with interference in a young person's academic performance and social relationships (King & Bernstein, 2001) and with parental stress and family conflict (Perrotta, 2011; Wimmer, 2010). In the longer-term, ESNA has been associated with increased risk of unemployment, social isolation, mental health difficulties, and offending behaviour in adulthood (Fremont, 2003; McShane et al., 2001).

2.3.1 The prevalence of ESNA

The prevalence of ESNA amongst YP remains largely invisible in terms of national statistics. Although the Department for Education (DfE, 2018) report that one in ten YP were 'persistently absent' from school in 2017, Thambirajah, Grandison, & De-Hayes (2008) have argued that it is difficult to ascertain the prevalence of ESNA due to differences in operational definitions and inconsistencies in tracking and recording between schools and Local Authorities (Thambirajah et al., 2008). Malcolm et al. (2003) found that the classification of an absence as 'authorised' or 'unauthorised' was often at the discretion of school staff, suggesting that national statistics based on the use of attendance codes may not be a reliable measure of student absence. Attendance codes may not also capture the heterogeneity and complexity of 'school refusal behaviour' (Kearney, 2008a) which may manifest as a series of lateness', unauthorised absences or illnesses. National statistics relating to school non-attendance should therefore be treated with caution and viewed within the context of specific educational settings. This hints at a wider consideration of terminology used at a national level to describe school non-attendance, a debate which reaches far beyond the scope of the current research.

2.4 The socio-political context of school attendance

As a result of the School Funding Reform (DfE, 2011) and the changing socio-political climate, support within LAs for YP who experience difficulties with attendance has changed. Funding previously held by LAs is now delegated to schools, resulting in a reduction in LA based support for YP and their families and an increased responsibility within schools for attendance. The DfE (2015i) outline the universal legal action LAs and schools can take to 'encourage' attendance. These actions are aimed at parents and carers.

Legal action	Description
Parenting Order	Parents are required to attend a parenting course and follow court orders to improve their child's attendance
Education Supervision Order	Appointment of a supervisor to support parents to get their child into education
School Attendance Order	When the local council thinks a child isn't receiving an education, parents are given 15 days to provide evidence that they have registered their child with a school or that they are home educating them
Fine (Penalty Notice)	Parents are issued with a fine for £60, rising to £120 if not paid within 21 days. Parents are prosecuted if they fail to pay the fine
Prosecution	A fine of up to £2,500, a community order or a prison sentence of up to 3 months

Table 2: School attendance parental responsibility measures (DfE, 2015i)

Despite their national application, there is little published evidence that these more universal methods improve the attendance of YP (Zhang, 2004). Zhang's (2004) examination of the relationship between parental prosecution for attendance (in the form of fines, court orders and jail sentences) and levels of 'school absenteeism' in 'Local Education Authorities' in England and Wales found no relationship between parental prosecution and reduced rates of student absenteeism. Zhang's findings (2004) suggest that parental prosecution may not bring about improvement in school attendance, highlighting a need to explore the use of different, more individualised approaches to support school attendance.

2.5 Dominant theories of school non-attendance

A review of the literature identified a number of theoretical accounts of ESNA, including; family systems, psychodynamic, clinical and behavioural. These accounts are apparent in the way in which ESNA is conceptualised, described and supported in the literature and different theoretical frameworks will therefore be alluded to throughout the current chapter. The next section will critically consider some of the dominant theories of ESNA.

Much of the research literature presents a strong clinical focus on ESNA, presenting links between poor school attendance and diagnoses of anxiety and depression in YP. Historically, separation anxiety has been used to explain ESNA, suggesting that 'school refusal' may arise from over-dependent parent-child relationships and should be most common when children start nursery. It has been found, however, that 'school refusal' can occur at any age (Toplis, 2004) and may peak at times of transition, including entry into school and transition to secondary school (Fremont, 2003; King & Bernstein, 2001). Moreover, Pilkington and Piersel (1991) argue that theories of separation anxiety in relation to ESNA fail to consider influencing factors outside of the parent-child relationship. Psychodynamic and behavioural theories have also been applied to ESNA (Place, Hulsmeier, & Taylor, 2000). Psychodynamic theory focuses on the troubled thoughts, feelings and behaviours of YP in relation to their family relationships or an aspect of school, and behavioural theory considers how the 'school refusal' behaviour of YP might be changed through positive or negative behavioural reinforcement. Behavioural theory, however, has been criticised, for failing to acknowledge the agency of YP and assuming that individuals are passive recipients of their external environment.

Dominant clinical, behavioural, psychodynamic, and family relational theories of ESNA appear to centre upon assumptions made by others about the attendance behaviour of YP, with undue emphasis on their perceived individual characteristics, rather than on situational factors (Ross, 1977) which may impact school attendance. More recently, Nuttall and Woods (2013) have applied Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory to 'school refusal behaviour', suggesting that the attendance behaviour of YP should be viewed in terms of bi-directional influences within the systems of YP's specific contexts. In line with the research of Nuttall and

Woods (2013), the use of ecological systems theory seemed most pertinent for the current study, which focused on the possibility of support through a range of contextual factors and dynamic systems.

2.6 Terminology used to describe school non-attendance

The terminology used to describe school non-attendance has been debated extensively within the literature (Pellegrini, 2007). Wilkins (2008) argued that this debate has hindered research into successful interventions, highlighting that a critical consideration of terms is important for the current study.

Different conceptualisations of school non-attendance exist across a range of research fields including, but not limited to, those of social work, criminal justice, mental health and education. Terms such as 'school refusal', 'school phobia' and 'truancy' have been used, often interchangeably and without precision (Thambirajah et al., 2008), to describe the behaviour of YP who experience difficulties attending school. In line with dominant theories of ESNA, the literature generally presents a strong clinical focus (Pellegrini, 2007), using terms which allude to within-child conceptualisations of problematic behaviours and failing to acknowledge the situations and contexts of YP. These terms include 'school phobia', 'school refusal' and, more recently, 'emotionally based school refusal' (West Sussex County Council EPS, 2004).

In an attempt to describe the visible behaviour associated with school non-attendance in a more neutral way, terms such as 'chronic non-attendance' (Lauchlan, 2003), 'problematic school absenteeism' (Kearney, 2008a; 2008b) and 'extended school non-attendance' (Pellegrini, 2007) have been used. Pellegrini (2007) explains that, through this, it is hoped that attention can be directed to the young person's wider environment, including that of the school.

'School refusal' has generally been the term of choice for the majority of educational researchers and was first described by Berg, Nichols and Prichard (1969) in accordance with four criteria; a persistent difficulty attending school, severe emotional upset when faced with the prospect of school, staying at home with parental knowledge, and the absence of antisocial behaviours. Despite these criteria

remaining central to conceptualisations of 'school refusal' (Lauchlan, 2003; Lyon & Cotler, 2007), no universally agreed definition of 'school refusal' exists (Thambirajah et al., 2008) creating confusion within the literature (Lauchlan, 2003). Some authors argue that the term encompasses the idea of a lack of motivation to attend school (Archer, Filmer-Sankey, & Fletcher-Campbell, 2003), tied to the avoidance of emotionally distressing situations within the school environment (Havik, Bru, & Ertesvåg, 2014), whilst others propose that it refers to a spectrum of non-attendance behaviours linked with generalised anxiety (Kearney & Silverman, 1999).

To add further complication, it has been suggested that individuals, schools, services and groups of professionals differ in their understanding of terms used to describe difficulties with school attendance. Archer et al. (2003) found this to be the case amongst professionals in 60 'Local Education Authorities' in the UK. Using surveys and case studies, their study explored professional understanding of 'school refusal' and 'school phobia' and found there to be a lack of shared consensus between practitioners regarding definitions, which were often used interchangeably.

In an attempt to make sense of some of the terminology used in the literature, Thambirajah et al. (2008) defined the core characteristics associated with different definitions. Features of these definitions are presented in the table below. Thambirajah et al. (2008) note that, despite this attempted categorisation, the reality of YP's individual presentations may be more complex.

Term	Features
'Truancy' ('wagging' or 'skiving')	School non-attendance without school knowledge or consent or parental permission
'Parentally condoned absence'	A parent keeps a child at home for their own (parental) reasons
'School phobia'	The specific fear of a situation at school or aspect of school which prevents the young person from attending (this term is now thought to be outdated)
'Separation anxiety'	Non-attendance due to the child's difficulty or fear of separating from their attachment figure
'School refusal'	The young person experiences severe emotional difficulties relating to school attendance and is reluctant to attend school

Table 3: Terminology (Thambirajah et al., 2008)

Lauchlan (2003) highlights that, traditionally, ‘school refusal’ has been presented as distinctive from ‘truancy’. ‘School refusal’ has generally been linked with internalising emotional difficulties including fearfulness and anxiety, and ‘truancy’ with externalising behavioural problems, a lack of anxiety and the perception that YP ‘will not’ attend school. The extent to which parents are knowledgeable about their child’s absence from school also seems to have contributed to the use of these different terms. Berg et al. (1969) suggest that the parents of ‘school refusers’ are usually aware of their child’s non-attendance, whereas those of ‘truants’ are not. Although this split is popular, Kearney (2008a) argues that the categorisation of YP into two distinct groups is essentially artificial and suggests that ‘school refusers’ may also show externalising behaviours typically associated with ‘truancy’. In support of this, Berg et al. (1993) found that they were unable to maintain a clear dichotomy when classifying YP as either ‘truants’ or ‘school refusers’ and were presented with a group of YP whose attendance difficulties could not be defined as either. Egger, Costello and Angold (2003) further found that YP who were classified as ‘truants’ also met the criteria for ‘pure anxious school refusal’ and that YP’s categorisation according to the labels ‘school refuser’ and ‘truant’ varied from day to day according to their behavioural presentation. These findings highlight the complex and dynamic nature of YP’s attendance difficulties and suggest that labels such as ‘school refusal’ and ‘truancy’ may not fully encompass the range of behaviours observed. Moreover, these terms may present a fixed, unrepresentative and limiting view of YP’s school non-attendance, suggesting that the use of more neutral terms may be appropriate.

The terms ‘school phobia’ and ‘separation anxiety’ have also been criticised as presenting fixed and narrow views of school non-attendance. Pellegrini (2007) argues that both terms imply psychopathology amongst populations of YP, many of whom do not present with clinical levels of anxiety (Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro, 1998). Thambirajah et al. (2008) further propose that the terms imply causality, locating problems within the school context or within the parent-child relationship. ‘School phobia’, for example, implies a phobic reaction to a specific school-based stimulus and ‘separation anxiety’ suggests difficulties separating from an attachment figure. Lauchlan (2003) notes that this may not always be the case and suggests that YP may experience difficulties with school attendance for a range of reasons. Pellegrini (2007) also raises concerns about terms which attempt to

suggest the underlying causes of school non-attendance, arguing that these do not represent the heterogeneous, dynamic and complex nature of problems and may lead to assumptions about the causality of behaviour. He uses the term 'extended school non-attendance' to describe the observable behaviour of YP in a neutral way. This term also highlights the persistent nature of attendance difficulties and directs attention to the wider school environment.

The current research will adopt Pellegrini's (2007) term 'extended school non-attendance' (ESNA) in an attempt to refer to behaviour neutrally and account for a range of possible influencing factors without prior assumption about the experiences of others. This term will be abbreviated to 'ESNA' throughout the current research and will refer to situations of 'long-term low' or 'non-attendance' at school (How, 2015), reemphasising the potential impact of systemic or environmental factors on the behaviour of YP (Pellegrini, 2007) in line with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Although Pellegrini (2007) does not apply the term to a specific population, for the purpose of the current study descriptive, behaviour-based criteria were used to identify and recruit participants. These recruitment criteria are outlined in section 3.9.1.

Through a critical appraisal of the terminology used in the literature in the field of school non-attendance, it could be deduced that further understanding of ESNA has been hindered by a lack of common conceptualisation and shared language. The validity and reliability of literature considered in the following sections therefore requires close consideration. The next sections of the chapter consider factors associated with ESNA. An exploration of these factors seems relevant for the current study, as associated factors may support or hinder a return to school for YP.

2.7 Factors associated with extended school non-attendance (ESNA)

On considering the factors associated with ESNA, the literature presents an equally complex picture. Lyon and Cotler (2007, p. 552) highlight that, not only are different terms used to refer to different groups of YP but, *"the criteria used to identify students for inclusion in research are often inconsistent and frequently overlap".* Criteria for inclusion range from 10% of school days missed by young people (Last,

Hansen, & Franco, 1998) to 40% (Lyon & Cotler, 2007) and studies which explore ESNA and associated factors are largely based on clinical samples of YP. The lack of representation of wider populations of extended school non-attenders should therefore be noted.

2.7.1 Within-child factors

The idea that school non-attendance is underpinned by within-child factors has been historically dominant within the literature. The predominant presentation of ESNA as a clinical, within-child 'problem' which requires 'treatment' has directed previous research to focus on characteristics of YP who experience ESNA. Clinical diagnoses of generalised anxiety, depression, specific phobias, social anxiety, and conduct disorders have all been linked with school non-attendance (Kearney, 2008a; Wimmer, 2010), alongside within-child factors considered to be less clinical such as; poor self-concept, feelings of social isolation, learning difficulties and a lack of social skills (Thambirajah et al., 2008; Malcolm et al., 2003; Reid, 2008).

Assessment of 'school refusal' has typically included diagnostic interviews and child self-report questionnaires which assess for depression, social anxiety and behaviour problems (Kearney & Bates, 2005). Kearney and Albano (2004), for example, assessed 143 YP with 'school refusal behaviour' using diagnostic interviews and the 'School Refusal Assessment Scale' (SRAS) (Kearney & Silverman, 1993) which measures four possible functions of 'school refusal behaviour';

1. avoiding school-related stimuli that provoke negative affectivity
2. escaping from school-based aversive social or evaluative situations
3. gaining attention from significant others
4. pursuing positive tangible reinforcements (e.g. watching TV or engaging in enjoyable activities when not at school)

Kearney and Albano (2004) identified emotionally based clinical disorders, such as separation anxiety disorder, in two thirds of their sample, suggesting a link between within-child difficulties and 'school refusal behaviour'. It could be argued, however, that this study was designed to focus on clinical reasons for 'school refusal behaviour.' Kearney and Albano (2004) focused on clinical characteristics of a sample of YP who had previously been referred to a clinic for their behaviour and

were measured using clinical methods. This could present a restricted view of YP and their individual situations and has implications for the way in which attendance difficulties are perceived by wider society. The use of diagnostic questionnaires could also be considered deterministic, overlooking the possible influence of wider environmental factors, the agency of YP and the interaction between the two. Moreover, Last et al. (1998) highlight that individual experiences of anxiety and depression vary across populations of YP, over time and within YP themselves, suggesting that diagnostic questionnaires may not capture the dynamic nature of experiences.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposes that the behaviour and psychological development of YP can be influenced by factors in their wider environments, immediate environments including their home, school or peer environments (their microsystem) and the interactions between these (their mesosystem). In the context of school attendance, Lyon and Cotler (2009) suggest that connections between parents and schools and aspects of the school environment may impact upon YP's attendance and Kearney (2008b) proposes a multi-faceted pathway to non-attendance which accounts for numerous reciprocal influencing factors and the dynamics between them. Family-based factors associated with school non-attendance will be considered in the next section, followed by school and community factors. It should be noted that, although these factors are presented in separate sections, the ideas of Bronfenbrenner (1979), Lyon and Cotler (2009) and Kearney (2008b), suggest that factors interact across a number of systems and so should be considered dynamically and holistically in the context of individual experience. Moreover, Darling (2007) suggests that the use of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory should not lose sight of the agency of individuals and a consideration of the mechanisms through which factors may influence behaviour.

2.7.2 Family factors

Psychodynamic theories of ESNA link co-dependence and separation anxiety in the parent-child relationship with school attendance difficulties (Place et al., 2000; Fremont, 2003). Further research suggests links between ESNA and parental depression and a lack of parental involvement in a child's education (Thornton, Darmody, & McCoy, 2013; Reid, 2008). School staff reports in research by Beckles

(2014), Gren-Landell et al. (2015) and Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson & Kirk (2003) also suggest that school staff associate ESNA with chaotic home environments, inadequate parenting and disorganised lifestyles. It could be argued, however, that judgements relating to these terms are subjective, and may further be influenced by the relationships school staff have with specific families. Kearney and Silverman (1995) describe specific family subtypes linked with YP who show 'school refusal'; enmeshed, conflictive, isolated, detached and healthy. They identified that families of 'school refusers' scored highly for levels of conflict and reported participating in less activity outside of the family, in comparison to 'normative' families. However, it could be argued that measures used to assess family subtypes were also subjective, alongside perceptions of what constitutes a 'normative' family. Lyon and Cotler (2007) highlight, for example, that most studies in the context of school non-attendance present anglocentric conceptualisations of family and pay little attention to cultural differences in family values, structure and behaviour.

Dalziel and Henthorne (2005) suggest that school non-attendance may be linked with parental capacity to address behaviour rather than parenting skills. They found that parents differed in their responses to their child's 'poor attendance', describing four approaches;

- parents/carers who try hard to tackle poor attendance
- parents/carers who describe themselves as feeling powerless to tackle poor attendance
- parents/carers who appear to be over-protective or dependent on their child
- parents/carers who are either apathetic about tackling poor attendance or who appear not to engage with the school or other support professionals

(Dalziel & Henthorne, 2005, p. 4 & 5)

Parental attitude towards education has also been linked to ESNA. Malcolm et al. (2003) examined the causes and effects of pupil absence by gathering information from YP, parents, teachers and professionals across 13 primary and 14 secondary schools in seven 'Local Education Authorities' in England. Teachers and other professionals in their study perceived that the parents of 'truants' placed a low value on education and were more likely to condone absences. They also found that parents of YP who experienced difficulties with attendance perceived regular school

attendance as less important than did parents of children who did not have attendance problems. However, generally these parents were unhappy with their child's school non-attendance.

Considering the family in context, poor primary school attendance has been linked to disadvantage, including living in an overcrowded home and being eligible to receive free school meals (DfE, 2012). The Department for Education (2012) also suggest that YP with identified attendance difficulties are more likely to come from some of the poorest backgrounds. Thambirajah et al. (2008) identified a number of dynamic family life events which are thought to contribute to 'school refusal' including; parental separation, bereavement, family social or financial stress, the birth of a sibling, and the physical and mental health problems of parents. Kearney (2008b) stresses that these associated factors, however, do not necessarily imply causality and notes that causality may operate in an indirect or bidirectional manner. Thambirajah et al. (2008) suggest, for example, that the 'school refusal' behaviour of a child may impact upon the functioning of the family. Grandison's (2011) research, which focused on the reintegration of five 'school refusing' YP into mainstream school, highlighted the emotional impact of 'school refusal' on the well-being of parents and on family life.

2.7.3 School and community factors

Several studies suggest that the school and community environments play an important role in school attendance. Kearney (2008b) highlights contextual risk factors relating to school attendance including; homelessness and poverty, teenage pregnancy and family and community values. Moreover, although ESNA can occur at any age (Toplis, 2004), it is thought to peak at specific times of transition including entry into school (aged 5-6 years) and transition to secondary school (11-12 years) (Elliott, 1999; Fremont, 2003; King & Bernstein, 2001).

YP and their parents cite a range of school-based factors as underlying reasons for 'missing school' and 'school refusal' (Malcom et al., 2003; Beckles, 2014; Havik et al., 2014) including, but not limited to:

- boredom with lessons
- problems with or dislike of teachers

- wanting to avoid tests
- the complexity of the secondary school environment
- disruptive behaviour of others
- fear of academic failure

social reasons:

- being bullied
- peer pressure
- social isolation

(Malcolm et al., 2003, p. 31, Havik et al., 2014)

Further elements of the school environment have been linked with poor school attendance. Epstein and Sheldon (2002) found that 'truancy', for example, was more prevalent in schools in which behaviour and attendance policies were inconsistently enforced and poor interactions existed between parents and school staff. Schools with low staff morale, rigid management styles, large class sizes and low levels of achievement have also been linked with high numbers of 'school refusers' (Lauchlan, 2003).

With the aim of gathering information about the causes and effects of pupil absence, Malcolm et al. (2003) explored the views of YP, parents, teachers and professionals through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and focus groups. They generally found that YP and parents were more likely to cite school-based reasons for school non-attendance than individual or home-based reasons. Their study included YP who were defined as 'truants' and their parents, but also YP who had not experienced 'attendance difficulties' and their parents, suggesting that the population interviewed may not have been representative of those with 'attendance difficulties'. It may have been most helpful to consider school non-attendance from the perspectives of those who were experiencing it. It is also possible that participants' interpretation of 'absence from school' was highly subjective. Malcolm et al. (2003, p. 4) used the term 'truancy' to refer to absences which YP themselves *"indicated would be unacceptable to teachers*", which seems dependent on YP's perception of what is deemed 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable.' Moreover, different terminology, including 'truancy', 'attendance problems' and 'habitual poor attender' is used throughout the

study, highlighting a lack of clarity around terminology. Despite this, parents, YP, some secondary school staff and 'Local Education Authority' representatives in their study highlighted school factors as integral to problems with school attendance, including inappropriate curriculum, racial harassment and peer pressure. In research conducted by Archer et al. (2003) teachers and professionals also identified; fear of specific locations at school, size and layout of the school, inappropriate provision and conflict with teachers as related to 'school refusal'. These findings suggest that, irrespective of terminology used, different groups perceive school-based factors to be related to ESNA. In light of this, the school climate, learning environment and interpersonal relationships at school will now be considered within this section in relation to ESNA.

2.7.3.1 School climate

The school climate, defined as *"the extent to which students feel safe, accepted, valued and respected"* (Hansberry, 2016, p. 28) has been found to be related to student attendance (Brookmeyer, Fanti, & Henrich, 2006). Van Eck, Johnson, Bettencourt and Johnson's (2017) survey of around 25,000 YP in the United States regarding their opinions about school climate found that 'chronic absence' was lower in schools which students perceived as having positive climates, including; good relationships with teachers, parental involvement in their education, feelings of school connectedness and positive learning environments. It is important to note, however, that this study did not specifically explore the perceptions of YP who were considered 'chronically absent' from school. The parents of 'school refusers' in Havik et al.'s (2014) study perceived that their children valued predictability and a sense of being valued in their school environment, and Thambirajah et al. (2008) suggest that whole school approaches which promote the emotional wellbeing of staff and students and promote inclusion can support school attendance for vulnerable YP. School climate has been viewed as a multi-faceted construct which reflects the perceptions of YP relating to their interactions at school and their beliefs, attitudes and values associated with their school environment (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, & Johnson, 2014). For this reason, it seems important to ensure that the perceptions of YP are at the centre of research which explores the way in which factors relating to school climate may be linked to school non-attendance.

2.7.3.2 Learning environment

Research by Reid (2008), which investigated professional perspectives on the causes of 'non-attendance', found that professionals cited the learning environment, including the unsuitable nature of the national curriculum for some pupils, as a cause of 'non-attendance', alongside poor teaching. It has been found that 'chronic absence' is lower in schools in which students perceive that expectations of learning tasks are clear; the school environment is perceived as orderly; and learning tasks are seen to be challenging (Van Eck et al., 2017). Parents in Havik et al.'s (2014) study suggested that their child's non-attendance was related to unrealistic academic demands and a lack of clarity about what was expected of YP in lessons. Parents in this study suggested that 'school refusal' could be prevented by adapting factors in the learning environment to ensure that it was less noisy and unpredictable, and that school work was sufficiently differentiated. They also spoke of the supportive nature of teacher flexibility in relation to their child's needs in the classroom e.g. ensuring that YP did not have to read aloud in class if they did not want to (Havik et al., 2014). Wilkins (2008) interviewed four students who had previously 'refused' to attend school but were now regularly attending an alternative provision for YP with special educational needs (SEN). She found that, in comparison to their previous schools, YP preferred the calm classroom atmosphere of the alterative setting and spoke positively of fair rule enforcement. Whilst Wilkins' (2008) study highlights what YP with SEN perceive is supportive in their school environment in relation to their attendance, it is important to note that YP had entered a new specialist educational setting, in which expectations, routines, and relationships, amongst other factors, may have been notably different to their previous schools. Wilkins (2008) asserts that it is important to view her findings in the unique context of the school in which the research was conducted.

2.7.3.3 Interpersonal relationships

Interpersonal relationships between school staff and YP are thought to be associated with school attendance. Students in Wilkins' (2008) study also highlighted that they perceived that teachers at their new setting treated them as individuals and fulfilled their academic and emotional needs. Eaton (1979) suggests that relationships between teachers and YP at school may be the factor most significantly related to

'school absenteeism'. 'Non-attendance' has been linked with poor or hostile student-teacher interactions (Lauchlan, 2003) and student perceptions that teachers are encouraging and willing to help have been linked with lower levels of 'chronic absence'. Parents of 'school refusers' in Havik et al.'s (2014) study suggested that having teachers who were emotionally supportive and showed respect and trustworthiness promoted feelings of safety and predictability for their children. These feelings were viewed as being related to good school attendance. The authors acknowledge, however, that parents may not actually know what was experienced by their children at school and that information may be biased by a tendency for parents to assign importance to school-based factors in cases of ESNA (Malcolm et al., 2003).

Peer relationships between YP at school are also thought to be associated with 'school refusal.' (Thambirajah et al., 2008). YP with persistently low school attendance in How's (2015) doctoral thesis, perceived that bullying and difficulties making and maintaining friendships were linked to their experiences of low attendance. Parents in Havik et al.'s (2014) study viewed friendships as a protective factor against 'school refusal', and parents of YP without 'attendance problems' in Malcom et al.'s (2003) study cited bullying as the main reason for difficulties with attendance. However, it is again important to note that these parents may not have had direct experience of this with their own children. Archer et al.'s (2003) survey of teachers and 'Local Education Authority' personnel also cites perceived bullying as a factor likely to precipitate 'school refusal.'

2.7.4 A dynamic approach to factors associated with ESNA

Although the previous sections have presented factors associated with ESNA separately, it may be problematic to view these as static and independent of one another. As noted by Kearney (2008b), association does not necessarily imply causality. Poor peer relationships at school, for example, may impact upon a young person's 'non-attendance behaviour' but they may also be a consequence of it. Specific etiological triggers of ESNA may not always be obvious or observable (Timberlake, 1984) and it has been suggested that explanations of ESNA are likely to be multi-factorial, interlinked, dynamic, and complex (Malcolm et al., 2003; Nuttall & Woods, 2013), representing a multiplicity of needs in YP, and making it impossible to

uncover a single factor or pathway responsible (Thambirajah et al., 2008). Gregory and Purcell (2014) apply Belsky's (1981) model of mutual family influences to situations of ESNA to suggest that the school environment, family environment and child's mental health may influence one another mutually, viewing situations of ESNA in terms of circular, rather than linear causality.

In addition to this, Reid (2008) suggests that explanations of ESNA may be constantly changing in accordance with the social, political and digital contexts in which YP and schools now find themselves. The literature also suggests that different groups of people may hold differing perceptions about the factors associated with ESNA, presenting further complexity. YP and parents tend to report school-based explanations of ESNA whereas school staff and other professionals generally explain ESNA through individual child and family factors (Malcolm et al., 2003), failing to account for the wider context in which individuals exist (Ross, 1977) or acknowledge individual agency. Past research seems to have generally focused on the perceived impact of independent, static factors associated with ESNA from the viewpoints of adults. These factors have historically been viewed in terms of fixed causality in contexts of interacting, bi-directional and ever-changing influencing factors. Moreover, the dynamic factors relating to ESNA and school re-attendance have not been widely explored from the viewpoints of the YP and parents who experience them. It therefore seems valuable that further research should focus on developing an in-depth understanding of experiences of ESNA within interacting systems of a range of influencing factors.

Having considered the literature in terms of factors associated with ESNA, I will now move on to explore the interventions and approaches presented within the literature, which aim to support YP experiencing ESNA to return to school. As is the case for the factors outlined above, although the following section presents interventions in separate sections, it is important to note that factors which support a young person's return to school may interact across different systems and may be supported by specific mechanisms (Darling, 2007).

2.8 Interventions for ESNA

Fremont (2003) suggests that intervention in cases of 'school refusal' should aim to initiate a return to school and re-establish regular school attendance. This aim may be based on the societal value placed on school attendance and perceived difficulties linked with not attending school. How (2015) warns that, in the context of intervention, the notion of 'success' should be considered critically, suggesting that notions of 'successful reintegration' may be subjective (how and by whom is 'success defined?). Despite this dilemma, research continues to focus on intervention which supports extended school non-attenders to return to school, largely from the viewpoints of adults.

No single intervention has been identified as being clearly effective or appropriate for all school 'non-attenders' (Elliott & Place, 2012). This is hardly surprising given the complex and heterogeneous nature of ESNA. Kearney and Bensaheb (2006) suggest that intervention should be linked with the perceived causality of ENSA. They propose, for example, that for a young person who is anxious, intervention could focus on relaxation and breathing training. A young person who is perceived to have unsatisfying peer relationships at school and social anxiety, could engage in cognitive intervention and social skills training (Kearney & Silverman, 1999). The type of intervention trialled may therefore be based on the way in which a child's non-attendance is conceptualised and could therefore focus on the family, YP or school system.

2.8.1 Treatment

Medical interventions have been outlined for YP who display 'school refusal' with a diagnosis of an anxiety disorder (King & Bernstein, 2001). Pharmacotherapy, including tricyclic antidepressants and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), has been identified as useful for some YP (Kearney, 2008a). In general, however, it has been found that YP with 'anxiety-based absenteeism' respond differently to medication. This can, in part, be attributed to the fluid nature of feelings of anxiety (Tyrell, 2005), suggesting that the 'success' of medical interventions should be viewed with caution.

2.8.2 Behavioural and cognitive-behavioural approaches

Behavioural interventions for ESNA include systematic desensitisation through graded exposed to school, and flooding, a more confrontational approach which has been considered unethical (Pellegrini, 2007). Lauchlan (2003) argues that there is little evidence to suggest that these techniques support YP to return to school following ESNA.

Cognitive behavioural approaches to intervention have become increasingly popular, especially with YP who appear anxious about attending school. Much of the literature relating to intervention for 'school refusers' now focuses on investigating the use of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) (King & Bernstein, 2001), including relaxation training (King, Gullone & Ollendick, 1990), breathing training and cognitive restructuring (Elliott, 1999). It has been found that CBT may be effective in encouraging YP to return to school (King & Bernstein, 2001; Maynard et al., 2018). However, Maynard et al.'s (2018) review of the literature highlights that CBT may not be effective in decreasing anxiety amongst populations of YP, suggesting that YP may return to school with a lower sense of emotional wellbeing following CBT. In contrast, Pina, Zerr, Gonzales and Ortiz's (2009) review of the efficacy of psychosocial interventions for 'school refusal' found that YP and parents reported improved levels of anxiety, fear, depression and anger 5-12 months after CBT intervention. These mixed findings, Maynard et al. (2018) suggest, reflect the diversity of CBT programmes and measures used, making it difficult to compare studies directly and suggesting a lack of sufficient evidence for the efficacy of CBT in this field. Lyon and Cotler (2009) suggest that the prominence of CBT in the literature means that wider contextual factors relevant to intervention may have been underrepresented. King and Bernstein (2001) acknowledge, for example, the importance of recognising the non-specific aspects of therapy which might support improvements in attendance and feelings of wellbeing. These include; relationships with a supportive therapist, expectations of attendance improvement and education about the problem of 'school refusal.' Moreover, although CBT strategies may be useful for individuals with diagnoses, it has been widely acknowledged that a proportion of 'school refusers' do not have diagnosable disorders (Egger et al., 2003), suggesting the need for further research with non-clinical samples.

2.8.3 Family-based approaches

Linked to psychodynamic theories of ESNA, family therapeutic work has been used with families of non-attenders (Bryce & Baird, 1986), although with limited evidence regarding its effectiveness. The idea that ESNA is linked to poor parental capacity to address specific behaviour (Dalziel and Henthorne, 2005) has resulted in the employment of parenting courses for behaviour management (Mansdorf & Lukens, 1987) and problem-solving training (Kearney & Albano, 2004). Research by Elsherbiny (2017) found that specific work with parents around differential reinforcement and increased social support was linked with increased school attendance and participation of YP in school activities. The provision of a key person with whom parents can liaise has also been found to have a positive impact on student attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Kearney & Bates, 2005). It is important to note that Elsherbiny's (2017) research was carried out with young children (those between the ages of four and six) in Egypt and therefore may have limited applicability to older secondary-aged YP in a UK context.

2.8.4 School-based approaches

Following his review of the literature, which focused on school absence prevention, Ekstrand (2015) suggested the need for a shift in focus away from the individual characteristics of young non-attenders and their families towards community and school-related factors which draw YP to school. Hallam and Rogers (2008) suggest that whole school approaches to dealing with ESNA could include; promoting a welcoming physical environment, school-based relationships built on mutual respect, high quality teaching and learning and a detailed and consistent approach to monitoring attendance. Reid (2003a; 2003b) also suggests specific school-based intervention aimed at addressing the learning, behavioural and social needs of YP. He does not, however, outline these interventions in detail or suggest specific intervention for YP considered 'persistent absentees'.

The presence of positive interpersonal relationships between staff, YP and their peers is thought to be effective in reducing ESNA, including the provision of a key adult or peer 'buddy' in school to support a young person's return (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Hallam & Rogers, 2008; Kearney & Bates, 2005; Archer et al., 2003). Hallam et al. (2006) found that group work, which did not focus on attendance but on

building relationships, improved the attendance of a group of YP. Carroll (2015) suggests that group interventions such as social skills training (Spence, Donovan & Brechman-Toussaint, 1999) and 'Circle of Friends' (Newton, Taylor & Wilson, 1996) may be relevant for use with extended school non-attenders who experience feelings of social anxiety and social isolation, although he points out that no research currently exists which describes their use with this group of YP.

Flexible timetable and curriculum arrangements have also been considered to improve the school attendance of YP experiencing attendance difficulties (Hallam & Rogers, 2008; Kearney & Bates, 2005). This may involve access to a quiet space at school, the implementation of a reduced timetable, easing of homework and individually tailored classroom instruction for YP (Hallam & Rogers, 2008; Kearney & Bates, 2005; Archer et al., 2003).

2.8.5 The ongoing nature of intervention

Throughout the literature, intervention is presented as occurring over a fixed period. Pina et al.'s (2009) review of psychosocial interventions suggests that CBT and school-based interventions were implemented for periods of between 22 days and 6 months. However, Grandison (2011) found that 'reintegration' into school following 'school refusal' was perceived by her participants (five YP) as an "*ongoing endeavour"* (Grandison, 2011, p. 155) with setbacks and challenges along the way. This finding highlights the importance of maintaining intervention and support over time (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

2.8.6 Targeting intervention to meet needs

As previously suggested, ESNA can be viewed as complex, multi-faceted and dynamic in nature. Lyon and Cotler (2009) and Sugrue, Zuel and LaLiberte (2016) therefore suggest a multi-systemic approach to intervention, based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. They propose that the following levels could be targeted by intervention:

- the microsystem (families, peers, schools); through social skills groups, parenting training or modifications in the school environment
- the mesosystem (interactions between systems); through relationships between parents and schools

- the exosystem (societal structures) through policy

Caseworkers interviewed by Sugrue et al. (2016) suggested that resource, relationship and information-based support were helpful for reducing 'chronic school absenteeism' in YP. However, their study focused on primary-aged YP and was conducted within specific communities in the US. Teachers and parents in Malcom et al.'s (2003) study highlighted the importance of tailoring intervention to the individual needs of YP and their families, highlighting a child-centred approach to support (Hawkrigg & Payne, 2014). In line with this, Lauchlan (2003) suggests that the implementation of an intervention plan focused on the young person's needs, and involving schools, parents and Educational Psychologists is the most appropriate course of action for dealing with 'chronic non-attendance.' Kearney and Silverman (1993) and Pellegrini (2007) also suggest that it is crucial to understand the functions of school 'non-attendance' behaviour in order to target intervention.

'What works' in relation to the 'treatment' of 'school refusal' has largely been built based on clinical experience (Elliott, 1999) and adult-led discourse. Strategies used to promote reintegration of school 'non-attenders' within an educational context remain largely unknown (Reid, 2005), suggesting an important role for further educational research with non-clinical samples of YP and their families. Furthermore, few studies have focused on the views of extended school non-attenders and their parents in relation to their perceptions about what they found helpful in supporting a return to school. Van Eck et al. (2017) suggest that these views may be crucial to understanding experiences of ESNA and intervention. The next section will critically consider research which has focused on the views and experiences of YP and parents in relation to intervention and support for ESNA.

2.9 The voices of young people and parents in relation to intervention and support for ESNA

2.9.1 The voices of YP in research

The importance of gathering and acting upon the voices of YP has been advocated by legislation and educational policy (Education Act, 1981; DfE, 2015ii) and supported by research which emphasises the benefits of eliciting YP's voices

(Halsey, Murfield, Harland, & Lord, 2006), which include increased self-esteem and a sense of autonomy for YP (Halsey et al., 2006) and opportunities for YP to understand their experiences by sharing them (Beckles, 2014). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) outlines that YP have a human right to express their views and should be consulted on matters which affect them and The Children's Act (2004) makes it a legal requirement for YP to be involved in decisions made which affect them. In the context of ESNA, this suggests that YP should be consulted about and involved in decisions made about their support. Despite this, there is a surprising lack of research which focuses on the voices of YP who have experiences of ESNA (Shilvock, 2010), and little still which relates to what YP find helpful in supporting them to return to school. The dominant voices within the literature in this context seem to be those of professionals and researchers who have succeeded in education and bring their own assumptions about what constitutes 'success' in cases of ESNA. The sparsity of research related to the views of YP suggests a need to illuminate their perspectives regarding what they find supportive and perceive to be successful.

2.9.2 The importance of parental voice

Parents are located as primarily responsible for their child's school attendance within legislation. In spite of this, very little research has explored what parents find supportive in situations of ESNA. The small body of research which does exist seems to focus on what parents perceive is supportive for their children, rather than what they also find supportive as parents, suggesting the need for further investigation.

2.9.3 Research which focuses on the voices of YP and parents in relation to intervention and support for ESNA

Despite the importance of the voices of YP and parents, few studies have explored the views of YP and their parents in relation to what they perceive to be helpful in supporting a young person's return to school. This seems surprising given the emphasis on child voice, and on parental responsibility for attendance in legislation. The heterogeneous and complex nature of experiences with ESNA highlights the need to explore the individual perspectives of YP and their parents. The development of a 'gold standard' of intervention which is hoped to be generalisable may not be

realistic or appropriate in this context and Nuttall and Woods (2013) suggest that developing evidence based on practice may be more fitting, as what is perceived to be supportive by one individual may not be perceived as supportive by another.

Whilst reading articles selected for the literature review, which focused upon intervention and support for ESNA, I noticed that only a small number of studies included the views and perceptions of YP and parents in relation to this support or intervention. Nine studies from the literature search were identified as exploring the views of YP and parents in relation to factors which supported school attendance or 'successful reintegration' following ESNA;

1) Havik et al. (2014) Parental perspectives of the role of school factors in school refusal
2) Wallace (2017) Parent/guardian perspectives on chronic absenteeism and the factors that influence decisions to send their children to school
3) Toplis (2004) Parents' views on emotionally based school refusal. Work at a policy level
4) Myhill (2017) Parents' views of their involvement during extended school non-attendance
5) Baker and Bishop (2015) Out of school: a phenomenological exploration of extended non-attendance
6) Aucott (2014) An exploration of pupils', parents' and teachers' perceptions of the causes of pupil non-attendance and the reasons for improvements in attendance
7) Wilkins (2008) School characteristics that influence student attendance: Experiences of students in a school avoidance program
8) Grandison (2011) School refusal: From short stay school to mainstream
9) Nuttall and Woods (2013) Effective intervention for school refusal behaviour

These articles seemed to be most pertinent for the current study. In line with the aims of the current research, the above studies focused on what YP and parents perceived was helpful in supporting school attendance or a return to school following ESNA. Given the emphasis in legislation and policy on the importance of consulting YP about matters which affect them, and the emphasis on parental responsibility for school attendance, it seemed important to select articles which highlighted these

voices in relation to intervention and support for ESNA. Some studies focused solely on the perceptions of parents, some on the perceptions of YP and some studies explored a range of views, including those of parents, YP, school staff and professionals. I will now go on to outline the findings of these nine articles, first exploring those which highlight the voices of parents in relation to intervention and support for ESNA and then moving on to consider studies which focus on the voices of YP.

2.9.3.1 Research which focuses on the voices of parents in relation to intervention and support for ESNA

Studies conducted by Havik et al. (2014), Wallace (2017), Toplis (2004) and Myhill (2017) all focused on parental perceptions. Havik et al. (2014) explored parental perspectives of school factors which promoted good attendance in YP. Their study highlighted that parents of YP who had experienced 'school refusal' perceived that; YP feeling valued, the emotional supportiveness and flexibility of school staff and a predictable and differentiated learning environment all supported the school attendance of their children. Toplis (2004) also carried out semi-structured interviews to gain parents' views of 'emotionally based school refusal.' This research found that parents highlighted the importance of trusting relationships with adults in school, timely intervention, and clear information about choices. However, whilst this study offered valuable insight into parental perspectives of factors which may support a young person's return to school, these were not explored in detail, nor did the authors consider what parents found supportive themselves. Myhill's doctoral thesis (2017) explored parents' views of their involvement during their child's ESNA with the hope of identifying barriers and facilitators to parental involvement in cases of ESNA. Her use of semi-structured interviews with eight parents identified that parents found communication and collaboration between home and school supportive. However, it is important to note that parents included in the study were those who had primary or secondary-aged children who had experienced or were still experiencing ESNA, suggesting that some YP had not yet returned to school. The children of parents interviewed for Wallace's (2017) research were also still experiencing difficulties with attendance. Wallace (2017) aimed to identify what support parents felt they needed to encourage their child's school attendance. Through her interviews with 22 parents and grandparents, it was identified that parents and carers would value improved

communication from schools and compassion from others in relation their individual situations. It is important to note, however, that some YP defined as 'chronically absent' in Wallace's (2017) study also included those who were absent from school for medical reasons, suggesting a different conceptualisation of ESNA than was employed by the current study.

2.9.3.2 Research which focuses on the voices of YP in relation to intervention and support for ESNA

Baker and Bishop's (2015) study sought to examine the lived experiences of four secondary-aged YP experiencing difficulties with school attendance, with the aim of informing professional practice. Using semi-structured interviews, they asked YP about the perceived causes of their non-attendance and their experiences of support. YP reported markedly different perceptions of the causes of their non-attendance, including depression, bullying and chronic fatigue, but similar experiences of support. Their experiences of support included; feeling a pressure to return to school quickly, a sense of being disbelieved about their non-attendance and a perceived delay between their initial non-attendance and receiving support. YP also spoke of involvement from external agencies including; CAMHS, the Home Education Service, therapeutic input and family counselling. Although Baker and Bishop's (2015) research highlighted the lived experiences of YP, it focused on YP who were either home educated or receiving support from the Home Education Service, suggesting that YP were still experiencing difficulties with school attendance. Moreover, their research did not specifically focus on what their participants found supportive and the authors emphasise the need to further examine YP's experiences of support in relation to ESNA.

Aucott (2014) highlights that few studies focus on cases of improved attendance. Her doctoral research, which focused on two case studies of YP who had returned to school following a period of 'non-attendance', found that YP, parents, teachers and professionals cited school-related factors, an improved understanding of the young person's reasons for 'school refusal behaviour' and the young person's views being acted upon as important for improving attendance. The YP in her study, however, were between six and ten years old, suggesting that these findings may not be reflective of a secondary school context, during which ESNA is thought to peak in YP

(Fremont, 2003; King & Bernstein, 2001; DfE, 2018). Aucott (2014) also acknowledges that the voices of YP and parents were not made explicit throughout her research, which incorporated the voices of YP and a range of adults. Of three participants in Aucott's study, one young person suffered from a medical problem which had affected his school attendance, and another's attendance had been impacted by a family holiday taken during school time. This suggests that the YP included in her study may not have represented a group of extended school non-attenders as conceptualised by the current study.

Wilkins (2008) conducted a study which focused on YP who had previously 'refused' school but were now 'willingly' attending an alternative provision. YP in her study reported that aspects of the academic environment, school climate, relationships with teachers and discipline had related to their improved attendance. Grandison (2011) also explored the 'reintegration' of five YP into school following 'school refusal behaviour' and a period at a short stay school using a case study approach. She explored views about the nature of 'school refusal' and the perceived barriers and facilitators to re-integration. Participants in Grandison's study perceived that a number of factors had supported their reintegration including; a personalised approach, a phased return to school, collaboration between parents and school, the presence of a supportive and trustworthy mentor, support for the young person to understand and cope with their emotions, and the provision of ongoing support. Although Grandison (2011, p. 186) elicited the views of YP, she, like Aucott (2014) highlights that their voices were "*somehow muted in the analysis"* of her case study data, which included the voices of a range of participants. This suggests a need to present the voices of YP as separate from those of adults.

Similarly, Nuttall and Woods (2013) used a case study approach to explore two individual cases of intervention for 'school refusal behaviour' and aimed to provide a dynamic view of factors associated with 'successful involvement.' They interviewed YP whose attendance had improved after they had previously been defined as 'school refusers', alongside parents and professionals involved in both cases. The authors identified that YP appreciated feelings of safety, security, belonging and of being valued at home at school, alongside the supported development of their confidence and self-esteem. In addition, supporting the social interaction and communication of YP was viewed as being important, including development of YP's

understanding of thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Conversations about aspiration and supporting motivation to learn were also highlighted as positive. Family-based support which focused on the needs of families was also suggested as vital for a 'successful' return to school, highlighting that intervention should consider interacting family and contextual factors. As a result of their findings, Nuttall and Woods (2013) proposed an ecological model of successful reintegration in which they identify factors which may support non-attenders to return to school:

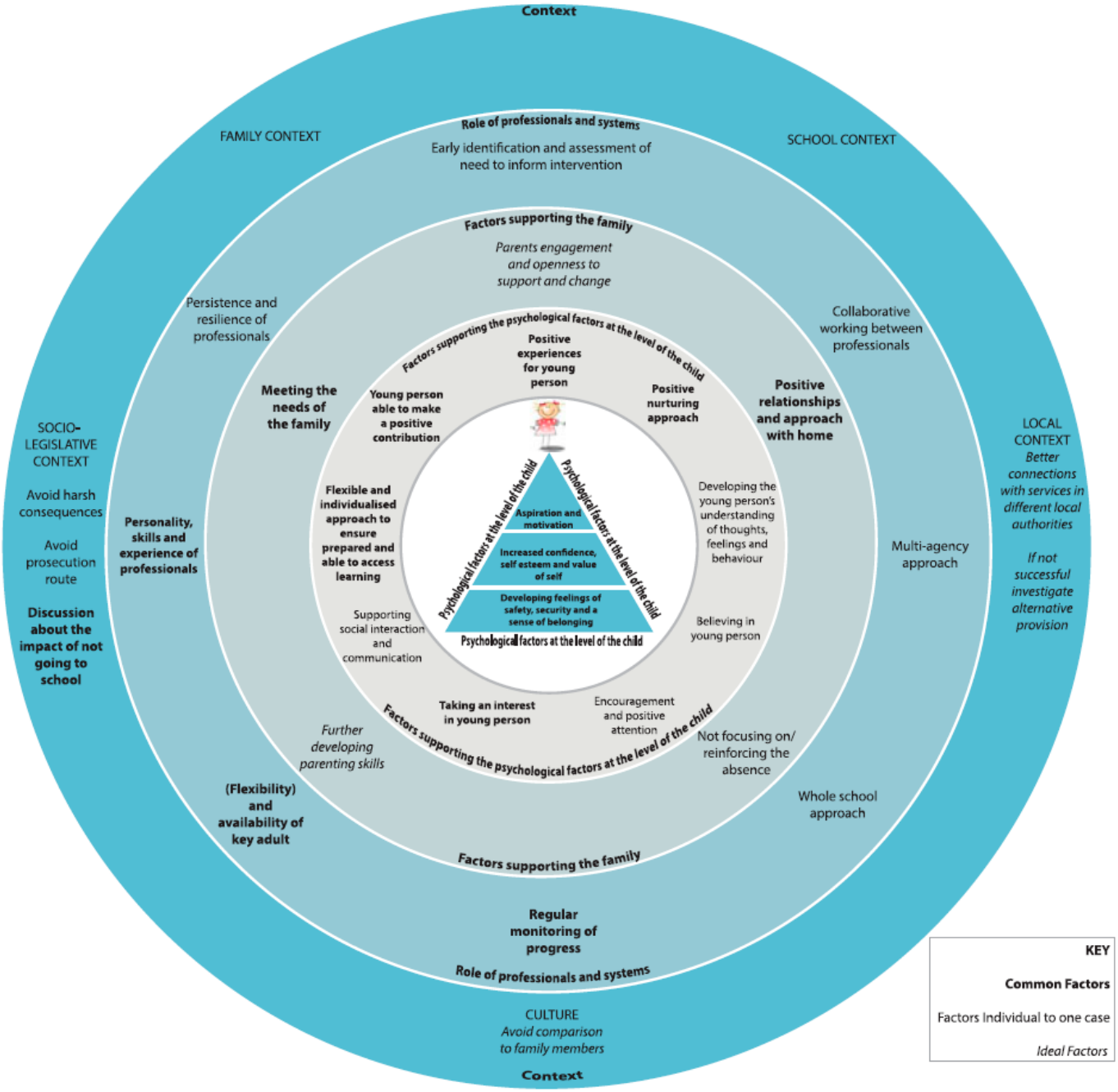

Figure 1: Nuttall and Woods' (2013) Ecological Model of Successful Reintegration

A summary of the supporting factors outlined by the model are presented below in Table 4:

Area of support	*Approach*
Child (supporting psychological factors)	• Developing aspiration and motivation • Increased confidence, self-esteem and value of self • Developing feelings of safety, security and sense of belonging
Factors supporting psychological factors	• Opportunities for the young person to make positive contributions • Adults taking a positive, nurturing, individualised and flexible approach and taking and interest in the young person • Supporting interaction and communication • Developing the young person's understanding of thoughts, feelings and behaviours
Family factors	• Building positive relationships between home and school • Meeting the needs of the family • Parental engagement with and openness to support and change • Developing parenting skills
Professionals and systems	• Early identification and assessment of need • Collaborative working • Personality, skills and experience of professionals; including availability and flexibility
Context	• Avoiding harsh consequences and prosecution • Discussing the impact of not going to school • Better connections with services in different local authorities • Investigating alternative provision if reintegration not successful

Table 4: Factors from Nuttall and Woods' (2013) Ecological Model of Successful Reintegration

Nuttall and Woods' (2013) model suggests that intervention for 'school refusal' should be multi-level and ecologically-situated, highlighting that interactions between individual YP, psychological support, family support and professional and systemic factors may support positive outcomes. However, Nuttall and Woods (2013) defined 'success' as a reported reduction in the young person's anxiety and an increase in attendance, suggesting within-child assumptions about the causality of a young person's 'school refusal'. Furthermore, although the study identified approaches which could be implemented in different areas, it adopted a case study approach and is therefore based on a range of perspectives, failing to specifically focus on the detail of what YP and parents found supportive or their hopes for the future with regards to support.

2.10 Chapter summary and research questions

Despite difficulties ascertaining the prevalence of ESNA in the UK, ensuring that YP attend school remains a national priority, highlighted by government guidance and legislation. This is largely due to established links between school attendance and the wellbeing of YP and their families. Terminology used to describe ESNA is used inconsistently across a number of different research fields and generally presents a fixed and static view of the behaviour of YP, whose situations are often heterogeneous, complex and ever-changing. The majority of research presents a strong clinical focus of ESNA and centres on 'uncovering causes' of ESNA within clinical samples of YP. Traditionally, individual child or family-based causes are presented, failing to acknowledge the wider contexts in which YP and their families exist and the multi-faceted nature of difficulties with school attendance. Universal legal strategies, which take a universal approach to intervention for ESNA, seem to dominate local and national guidance and legislation. This seems surprising given the complex, dynamic and heterogeneous nature of attendance behaviours, and evidence which suggests that punitive methods do not improve the school attendance of YP (Zhang, 2004). Previous research relating to 'successful' intervention, measured by a return to school, largely focuses on the viewpoints of teachers, professionals and researchers who highlight the possible impact of cognitive-behavioural, family and school-based interventions for ESNA. This

research suggests that increased social support for parents and school-based intervention which focuses on creating welcoming and flexible school environments can support YPs return to school (Elsherbiny, 2017; Epstein & Sheldon, 2001; Kearney & Bates, 2005; Hallam & Rogers; Archer et al., 2003). The literature further suggests that interventions for ESNA should be multi-systemic in nature (Sugrue et al., 2016) and meet the needs of YP and their parents over time (Hawkrigg & Payne, 2014; Lauchlan, 2003; Grandison, 2011).

Few studies to date have focused on the perceptions of YP and their parents in relation to intervention for ESNA and what these groups perceive supported a return to school. This too seems surprising given the emphasis on child voice and parental responsibility for school attendance in UK legislation. Van Eck et al. (2017) argue that exploring the perceptions of YP and their parents may be crucial to further understanding what they find successful and supportive in promoting more regular school attendance. The current literature in this area suggests that parents perceive that their children feeling valued and well supported through trusting relationships and timely intervention can support a return to school (Havik et al., 2014). Moreover, parents report valuing communication and collaboration between home and school and compassion from others in response to their situations (Myhill, 2017; Wallace, 2017). Research which explores the perceptions of YP in relation to intervention for ESNA highlights that YP value positive aspects of the school climate, including their relationships with others, the adoption of personalised, flexible approaches, and support over time to understand their emotions (Wilkins, 2008; Grandison, 2011). Authors of some of these studies highlight that they felt that the voices of YP were muted in their analyses by those of adults included in their studies, suggesting a need to analyse and present the voices of YP and adults separately in research. Moreover, although a number of the studies outlined above focus on what parents perceive to be helpful in supporting their child's return to school following ESNA, very few studies have also focused on what parents find supportive for themselves in situations of ESNA.

In light of the existing literature, my research aimed to identify what secondary-aged YP, and their parents, perceived was helpful in supporting YP to return to school following a period of ESNA. Furthermore, it aimed to identify what YP and parents would like to see implemented in the future, with the aim of contributing information

towards developing further practical support for extended school non-attenders and their parents.

The research questions which encompass these aims are:

1) What do secondary-aged young people, who have returned to school following a period of extended school non-attendance, and their parents, perceive was helpful in supporting young people to return to school?

2) What do these secondary-aged young people, and their parents, perceive to be desirable support for extended school non-attenders and their parents and what would they like to see implemented in the future?

The above questions aimed to capture a range of perceptions; those of YP and parents, across a range of timeframes; referring to perceptions of past experiences and recommendations for the future.

3. Methodology

Methodology, defined by Creswell (2013) as the process of research, refers to the way in which we go about acquiring knowledge about phenomena. The following chapter aims to outline the way in which I went about acquiring knowledge in relation to the research aims and questions detailed at the end of chapter 2.

3.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with an outline of the research aims and the use of a qualitative research framework for the current study. To inform the reader about the way in which my values and assumptions impacted upon research decisions and interpretations (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007), I will then discuss my values and beliefs. The philosophical and theoretical approaches which have shaped the research will then be discussed, including its grounding in social constructivist and interpretivist philosophies and the influence of positive and transformative frameworks of psychology. I will then explain my choice of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as the methodology for the current research, critically evaluating alternative approaches which were considered. Following this, the process of participant recruitment will be described, alongside the use of semi-structured interviews as an appropriate tool for data collection. I will explain my use of thematic analysis to analyse data, critically considering its use with my sample of participants. Throughout the chapter, ethical considerations which arose from the research design and process will be highlighted.

3.2 Research aims

An examination of the research aims, outlined at the end of chapter 2, highlights the appreciative nature of the current research. It focused on exploring what young people (YP) and parents perceived as supportive and aimed to identify what they perceived to be desirable support for others. The research aims also point to the possibility of the research being emancipatory and transformative in nature as it hoped, not only to illuminate the voices of participants, but also anticipated

contributing information towards practice and policy around extended school non-attendance (ESNA), through collaborative discussion with YP and parents about their views.

3.3 Qualitative research strategy

The current research was well suited to a qualitative research strategy as it aimed to explore individual experiences of returning to school following ESNA (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative research is based on the view that reality is constructed and interpreted by individuals, rather than on the assumption that a fixed reality exists and is waiting to be discovered and verified. Qualitative research is therefore concerned with exploring a *"plurality of truths"* (Fraser, 2004, p. 181) and acknowledges that YP and parents may have constructed and made sense of their experiences with ESNA, and a return to school, differently (Willig, 2001). Wiersma and Jurs (2009) suggest that, by capturing individual perceptions, accurate measures of participants' realities can be ascertained, and an understanding of a phenomenon can be deepened. In line with the aims of the current study, qualitative research also has the potential to inform interventions, policy and practice (Moriarty, 2011; Green & Thorogood, 2004). Although I did not seek to directly generalise the individual experiences of participants across populations, the research did aim to inform the development of further practical support for extended school non-attenders and their parents. This will be further discussed in section 3.12.1.

3.4 What makes good quality qualitative research?

Elliott, Fischer and Rennie (1999, p. 216) suggest that qualitative research can be evaluated based on criteria which consider how well a study's research aims are addressed in a useful and meaningful way. Tracy (2010) suggests that the quality of qualitative research can be considered in relation to a range of criteria:

1. the worthiness and relevance of a research topic, including its significant contribution
2. research rigour, including the richness of explanations

3. sincerity, transparency and reflexivity
4. credibility of interpretations
5. the way in which research has been effectively communicated to resonate with the reader
6. consideration of ethical issues

In practice, Stiles (1993) proposes that researchers should therefore ensure that they position their research both socially and culturally, by disclosing their own assumptions and value-bases. It is also suggested that researchers clearly outline research processes and procedures and demonstrate a close engagement with data collected, including evidence of their interpretations, allowing for transparency in order that the reader has the information they need to judge researcher interpretations accurately.

3.5 Researcher values

Whether we are aware of it or not, our values, beliefs and philosophical assumptions shape the way in which we imagine and conduct social research (Creswell, 2013). This includes our choice of research area, and method and tools for data collection and analysis (Tracy, 2010). The beliefs and values I hold, as a researcher, impacted upon the ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods of the current research. These beliefs and values will be outlined below, in an attempt to provide the reader with some insight into the motivations behind the research and the lens through which the research was designed and findings were interpreted. As outlined in section 1.3, my past experience of working in a community centre in an economically disadvantaged area of London, with young people experiencing extended school non-attendance, and their parents, acted as a key driver for the current research. Parents within this context sometimes faced financial penalties for their children's ESNA and told me that they often did not have the means to pay penalty fines. Parents further explained that they had found it difficult to access specialist support services, as the behaviour of their children did not often meet specific thresholds for support. As an individual strongly motivated by a sense of social justice, I perceived this system to be inequitable and unsupportive in nature and was drawn to the

current research topic in an attempt to explore more individualised approaches to support. I believe that listening to the voices of YP and parents is fundamental for informing these more individualised approaches to intervention and practice and align myself with a constructivist epistemology which assumes that the views of others are subjectively important. This philosophy recognises that individuals may hold differing views about what they believe to be important or supportive in their individual contexts and that these views may too differ from my own. It is important to note that my own experience of education and the assumptions I hold about the value of education may have also impacted upon my choice of research area. I had a largely positive experience of attending secondary school and appreciated my friendships at school and a feeling of belonging during my school years. I believe that other YP have the right to enjoy their time at school too. I am aware, however, that these experiences may not have been shared by participants who took part in the research and, moreover, that participants may not have viewed school or education as valuable or important. Lastly, I believe that positive change for individuals can be promoted through the use of strengths-based and solution-focused approaches in psychology and use these approaches in my own practice to support problem-solving. This value influenced my decision to focus on supportive aspects of experience and adopt an appreciative approach to the research.

3.6 Methodological orientation of the research

Before moving on to discuss the research design and methods, I will first explore the philosophical underpinnings of the current research and justify my use of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as the chosen methodological approach.

3.6.1 Ontology

Ontological positions in research refer to philosophical beliefs about reality. These beliefs can be viewed on a continuum, ranging from ‘realism’ (objectivism) at one end, the belief that reality exists as an external ‘truth’ and is ‘waiting to be discovered’, to ‘social constructivism’ (subjectivism) at the other end, the belief that reality is entirely based on human interactions, social constructions and perceptions (Carter & Little, 2007). For a study hoping to understand the perceptions of

participants, a ‘constructivist’ (subjective) ontology, which recognised the different realities constructed and interpreted by individuals, seemed appropriate. In line with Watts (2012), it was believed that individual insight was valuable in the current research, even though individual truth and reality for one person may have been different to that of another.

3.6.2 Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with how reality is known. Sarantakos (2005, p. 30) asserts that epistemology influences *“where knowledge is sought”* during research. A positivist approach may aim to ‘uncover’ a single truth using standardised measures or observation. In contrast, an interpretivist approach acknowledges that multiple realities or truths exist according to individual experiences and interpretations of events (Ponterotto, 2005).

Through a consideration of these philosophies, alongside the research questions and aims, it was deemed that the current research was based on a social constructivist-interpretivist philosophy. This philosophical stance emphasises that reality is a human construct and can be interpreted in a number of ways. It was believed that knowledge about what participants found helpful and supportive in their situations could only be sought by seeing the world from their perspectives. With these philosophical underpinnings in mind, I will now go on to explore the frameworks of social constructivism and positive psychology, on which the current research is based. I will then move on to discuss my choice of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a methodology and outline other methodological approaches considered for the research.

3.6.3 Social constructivist framework

AI is a strengths-based approach to research rooted in the philosophy of social constructivism, the belief that individuals develop subjective meanings in relation to their experiences, and a philosophy which acknowledges that these meanings can be multiple and complex. Social constructivism emphasises the importance of language and interpretation and suggests that reality is constructed by individuals through their use of language and social interactions (Burr, 2003). Willig (2013) acknowledges, for example, that “*the same phenomenon can be described in*

different ways, giving rise to different ways of perceiving and understanding it." (Willig, 2013, p. 7). Social constructivism also emphasises that knowledge about a phenomenon is co-constructed between a researcher and participant during the process of social research (Creswell, 2013).

3.6.4 Positive psychology and transformative frameworks for research

Sheldon and King (2001) suggest that a deficits-based approach to research may limit our understanding of successful human functioning, including positive processes, outcomes and human strengths. Positive psychology, defined as the study of "*ordinary human strengths and virtues"* (Seligman, 2002, p. 4) is thought to offer a "*unique lens for understanding the phenomena of human interaction and for uncovering previously underemphasized factors and processes that are at play in human systems"* (Boyd & Bright, 2007, p. 1020). Positive psychology emphasises the importance of strengths-based approaches in research. This type of research asks questions about "*what works, what is right, and what is improving"* (Sheldon & King, 2001, p. 216) and resonates with AI, which focuses on positive aspects of human experience and potential for positive change. Grounded in positive psychology, strengths-based approaches are used by Educational Psychologists (EPs) to bring about positive change in practice. These approaches, including solution-focused brief therapy (de Shazer, 1985), motivational interviewing (Rollnick & Miller, 1995), and coaching (Palmer & Whybrow, 2014), suggest that the use of positive psychology in research is relevant for practising EPs. Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) suggest that studies which focus on an appreciation of 'what is good' and 'what could be better' have the potential to impact the work of EPs by transforming perceptions about phenomena and instigating organisational and social change.

Both AI and the current research are further underpinned by a transformative framework for social research (Watkins & Cooperrider, 2000). Grounded in action research, which emphasises that knowledge can reflect power relationships within society (Creswell, 2013), AI suggests that the research process and the outcomes of research have the potential to bring about change in an emancipatory sense for individuals who may exist within a system they perceive to be unjust (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998). In the context of the current research, it was hoped that YP and parents would recognise their own strengths in situations of ESNA.

3.7 Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a strengths-based approach to research, sits alongside frameworks of positive psychology (Boyd & Bright, 2007) and is underpinned by social constructivism (Gergen, 2009). Intended as an approach to discover, understand and foster innovations in relation to social phenomena (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2003), AI "*concentrates on exploring ideas that people have about what is valuable… and then tries to work out ways in which this can be built on".'* (Reed, 2007, p. 2). Developed during the 1980s by David Cooperrider, AI is a type of action research (Lewin, 1946) which aims to bring about positive change and improve practice through a collaborative inquiry into human potential. During the process of AI, the best of 'what is' is highlighted and an image of 'what might be' is constructed, generating new knowledge about a desired future with the hope of translating this into practice (Cooperrider et al., 2003). The current research aimed to discover the best of 'what was' about YP's return to school after a period of ESNA and construct a desired future in terms of support for these extended school non-attenders and their parents. It was hoped that this knowledge might contribute information towards developing further practical support for YP and parents. The use of AI seems highly relevant for EPs who often work collaboratively, use solution-focused approaches and work towards applicable solutions. Boyd and Bright (2007) further suggest that AI can be closely linked to concepts of prevention, ecological analysis, diversity and empowerment; primary concerns of educational and community psychologists.

3.7.1 Rationale for using AI

AI was chosen as the methodology for the current research. It was felt that the use of AI would address the aim of the research, which hoped to contribute information towards developing further practical support for extended school non-attenders and their parents, and would support answering the study's two research questions;

1) What do secondary-aged young people, who have returned to school following a period of extended school non-attendance, and their parents, perceive was helpful in supporting young people to return to school?

2) What do these secondary-aged young people, and their parents, perceive to be desirable support for extended school non-attenders and their parents and what would they like to see implemented in the future?

My decision to use AI was also influenced by the social constructivist underpinnings of the research, and my value base as a researcher. As outlined in section 3.5, my belief that positive change may be supported by focusing on positive aspects of experiences and 'what's working well' aligns with the use of AI as a research methodology.

AI was further selected as an appropriate methodology for the current research for the following reasons:

1) AI focuses on the positive; the current research aimed to identify the positive experiences of YP and their parents in relation to returning to school following a period of ESNA i.e. finding out about the best of what was in a potentially challenging situation.

2) The ontological and epistemological foundations of AI (social constructivism; interpretivism) suggest that individual perceptions and experiences are valued, and they recognise that individuals have their own social constructions of phenomena. AI highlights the complexity of these constructions and acknowledges that a plurality of truths exist in relation to social phenomena.

3) AI is a form of action research. Reason and Bradbury (2008, p. 2) assert that *"the primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people".* The primary purpose of this research was that it hoped to produce knowledge which could be useful to others, including YP, parents, schools and wider organisations in order that further support for extended school non-attenders and their parents could be considered.

4) AI can be viewed as an inclusive and empowering approach as it focuses on the successes of participants and systems. This was an important element of the current research as the current political system in which ESNA exists is largely punitive. It was felt to be important that the voices of individuals who exist within this system were listened to (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998). The very process of engaging in AI

may have brought about positive change for individuals who began to recognise their own strengths through the research process.

3.7.2 The 4-D Cycle

Originally developed as a model for positive change within organisations, the process of AI can also be applied to groups and individuals (Kelm, 2005). The model is based on the 4-D cycle of change. This process is iterative and consists of four phases: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny. Those conducting AI research typically start at the Discovery phase of investigation and end at the Destiny stage (Reed, 2007), possibly to start at the Discovery phase again in light of acquired knowledge.

Discovery: Drawing on positive aspects, strengths, successes and best practice, the discovery phase focuses on finding out about *"the best of what is"* or *"what has been"* (Whitney, & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p. 7) for societies, organisations and individuals. Calabrese et al. (2010) suggest that this gives boundaries for the recognition of successful past practices. Information during this phase is usually generated from interviews with individuals or groups.

Dream: Aspirational thinking about an ideal future in relation to a phenomenon. During this phase individuals *"envision what might be"* (Cooperrider et al., 2003).

Design: Aspirations are made more concrete. 'What should be' and 'how it should be' are determined as individuals focus on the pragmatic aspects of a vision.

Destiny: A preferred future is co-constructed, and the designed vision is brought to life as an organisation begins to 'grow what will be.'

The current study focused on the Discovery and Dream phases of the 4-D cycle of AI and did not enter into the Design and Destiny phases, following the research of Walker and Carr-Stewart (2004) who also only used the first two phases. These first two phases were selected due to the time constraints of the current research and to reflect the two research questions, which focused on discovering the 'best of what was' and 'envisioning what might be' in the future.

3.7.3 Critique of AI

Whilst Shuayb, Sharp, Judkins & Hetherington (2009, p. 1) propose that one of the main strengths of AI is that it can provide *"a new outlook on a particular topic, avoiding stereotypical answers, empowering participants and identifying good practice,"* a number of criticisms exist in relation to AI's underpinning assumptions and its use in research and practice. Aldred (2011, p. 63), for example, suggests that the assumption that social systems are "…*basically harmonious, [providing] we overcome entrenched negativity to allow diverse voices and experiences space to speak"* may be too simplistic and explains that individuals may have different ideas about preferred futures meaning that complex and contradictory ideas may be identified by participants, professionals and by previous research.

Aldred (2011) also suggests that the claim that AI empowers participants who engage with its process should also be treated with caution. It is acknowledged, for example, that the term 'empowerment' can be interpreted differently by different groups (Isreal, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998). The current research hoped that interviews with participants might produce information which was helpful for others and might give the opportunity for participants to recognise their own strengths and successes. However, it is important to note that participant involvement in the research may not have led to increased power in terms of decision-making or social action due to the constrained contexts in which participants and professionals exist. Similarly, AI may assume that a social reality can be modified purely by changing the way we speak about it. This too may not acknowledge the complex socio-political contexts in which YP, their parents and professionals exist.

A further critique of AI suggests that it may ignore problems and leave participants with the feeling that their problems have not been acknowledged or listened to (Coghlan, Preskill & Tzavaras, 2003). Coghlan et al. (2003), however, assert that, rather than ignoring problems, AI aims to re-frame problem statements to focus on successes and strengths. Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2010, p. 18) state, "*we do not dismiss accounts of conflict, problems, or stress. We simply do not use them as the basis of analysis or action".*

Lastly, it is important to note that the Design and Destiny phases of AI were not entered into during the current study and it may therefore be argued that the full potential of this research could be restricted.

3.8 Consideration of other methodological approaches

Silverman (1993) is critical of research which fails to acknowledge the different methodologies which could have been used. AI shares philosophical principles with a range of methodologies, including those which incorporate narrative and discourse (Cooperrider et al., 2008) and I therefore considered a number of other methodological approaches for the current research. Having outlined my rationale for using AI, I will now discuss the other methodologies considered:

- Narrative Inquiry
- Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
- Case study approach

Narrative Inquiry is concerned with the way in which humans experience their world and focuses on the collection of stories as lived and told by individuals (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Similarly to AI, Narrative Inquiry recognises that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction and discourse. Narrative Inquiry could have been used for the current research to provide a detailed insight into the experiences of participants, focusing on a chronology of events and the meanings they gave to their experiences using language (Riessman, 2010). The research aimed, however, to focus on specific aspects of individual experience, namely what participants found helpful in supporting a return to school and AI was therefore deemed to be more appropriate.

A social constructivist paradigm also underpins phenomenological approaches to research (Moustakas, 1994), including Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA *"is concerned with experiences and meanings"* (Willig, 2001, P. 62) and allows researchers to find common meaning amongst the lived experiences of several individuals who experience the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The use of IPA for the current research would have placed emphasis on the phenomenon of ESNA, focusing on 'what' it is and 'how' a return to school was experienced by

participants (Moustakas, 1994). Although this may have been appropriate, the use of IPA may not have specifically focused on the positive experiences of participants and allowed for the co-construction of a preferred future in terms of support for extended school non-attenders in the same way in which AI did.

A case study approach was also considered for the research. Case studies have historically been linked with the use of AI as an analysis tool (Hammond & Wellington, 2013). Case study approaches focus on a "*'telling case' from which theory, concepts and hypotheses can be extracted"* (Roberts et al., 2004, p.11) and from which findings may be applied to other similar situations. Although this approach may have been considered initially appropriate for the current research, Thomas (2011) proposes that case study research and action research present differences in terms of their research purpose. He suggests that case study approaches aim to support an understanding of the detail of what is or was happening in a specific situation. Action research, however, he suggests, aims to help develop or improve practice. Although the current research did focus on the detailed experiences of participants, it aimed to focus on the development of practice from their accounts, in line with models of action research and AI. Case study approaches also focus on the use of multiple sources (Robson, 2011). The current research aimed to focus on the perceptions of YP and their parents, as it was deemed that these groups of individuals were those who had primarily experienced ESNA.

3.9 Research Design

Having discussed the philosophical underpinnings of the research, the research methodology adopted (AI), and the alternative approaches considered, the next section will outline the way in which the current research was conducted, including a discussion of the participant recruitment process and ethical considerations relating to this. Sections 3.10 and 3.11 will then outline the way in which data was collected and analysed. Creswell (2013) highlights the ethical dilemmas present at different stages of the research process, from the early stages of conducting research to its publishing. He suggests that, at the design stage, researchers should pay attention to the gaining of informed consent; ensure confidentiality and assess the possible

consequences of participation for individuals. These issues will be explored throughout this section, and I will outline the way in which ethical dilemmas relating to the research design were managed.

3.9.1 Recruitment of participants

Participants selected to take part in the research were secondary-aged YP between the ages of 11 and 18 years old, and their parents. As outlined in Chapters 1 and 2, it has been suggested that ESNA peaks during transition to secondary school (Toplis, 2004) and is more prevalent in secondary than primary schools (DfE, 2018). For this reason, secondary-aged YP, and their parents, were chosen as the focus for the current research.

A body of past research has focused on identifying reasons for, and behaviours associated with, ESNA. Recruitment criteria for past research has therefore focused on reasons for ESNA or specific behaviours. With the aim of focusing purely on the fact that YP had returned to school following ESNA, the following criteria were used for recruitment, based on research conducted by Nuttall and Woods (2013), Reid (2003a) and Berg (2002):

- The young person was on roll at a secondary school.
- The school attendance of the young person had previously fallen below 70% for a period of a term or more; representing extended school non-attendance (ESNA) (Reid, 2003a).
- During this period of ESNA, YP primarily remained at home with parental knowledge when absent during school hours.
- YP displayed a reluctance or refusal to attend school during this period (Berg, 2002).
- The young person's attendance was at 95% or above at the time of interviews, and had been for a term or more, representing regular attendance (Reid, 2003a).
- ESNA and re-attendance had happened within the last two years to ensure that participants were more likely to remember what they thought was helpful and why (Nuttall & Woods, 2013).

Although these were used as the initial recruitment criteria for YP, Reid (2003a) recognises that secondary schools have their own conceptualisations about what constitutes 'good attendance' and 'extended school non-attendance.' For this reason, the above criteria were used as parameters for discussions with schools during the recruitment process, although all YP approached to take part in the research met the recruitment criteria. The two YP who took part in the research had both experienced difficulties with attendance during the previous academic year (2016-17) and had returned to school with 95% attendance or above at the beginning of the Summer Term of 2017, representing their 'regular attendance' at school during the Summer Term of 2017 and between September and November of the Autumn Term 2017 when interviews were conducted.

3.9.2 Approach to recruiting participants and gaining consent

The Educational Psychology Service (EPS) in which the research was based was not offering a link service to schools at the time the research was conducted and therefore did not have ongoing relationships with secondary schools. At the beginning of the recruitment process, in May 2017, Educational Psychologists (EPs) within the service were asked to provide the names of schools with whom they had previously been linked and who they knew to have good pastoral support. 16 secondary schools were identified and contacted via email about the research between May and September 2017. Two schools replied to express their interest in participating. I will refer to them as school A and school B. An initial meeting was held at school A in September 2017 and they identified one young person who met the recruitment criteria. In October 2017 I met with school B and they identified three YP who met the recruitment criteria. It was decided that the attendance officers from school A and school B would contact parents of the YP via phone.

All four parents contacted (one from school A and three from school B) expressed an interest in taking part in the research. Letters and information sheets were passed on to parents via the school. All four parents gave permission for their children to receive information about the research too, and student letters and information sheets were given to YP via the school to find out if they too were interested in taking part. Copies of these are presented in Appendices 5, 6, 7 and 9. With parental permission, schools provided me with parental contact details and I contacted

parents directly via phone to tell them more about the research, answer any questions they might have and arrange interviews.

At this stage of the recruitment process, the young person identified at school A decided that she did not want to take part. Interviews were therefore arranged with the three YP and their parents from school B. However, a week prior to the date of interview, one of the YP from school B decided that she did not want to take part in the study either. Her mother told me that she believed this to be due to her daughter's on-going difficulties with school attendance and the possibility that the she may have found it emotive to speak about her experiences. I offered to meet with the young person, at home or school, in an attempt to alleviate any of her concerns. However, this offer was declined.

In November 2017 I approached another secondary school (school C). This school had, again, been recommended as having a good pastoral support team by an EP who used to work with the school. A meeting with the attendance officer at school C was arranged for December 2017. However, this meeting was cancelled due to staff sickness. The meeting was re-arranged for January 2018 and, again, was unfortunately cancelled by the school. The school were difficult to contact after this and another meeting was unable to be arranged.

3.9.3 Ethical implications of the recruitment process

The recruitment process raised a number of ethical implications in relation to the practicalities of recruiting participants, and also in terms of the possible emotional impact on participants who were approached for the research. I was aware, for example, that certain YP or parents may have been excluded from the opportunity to participate due to perceptions by school staff that they were more difficult to engage.

Felzmann (2009) highlights further ethical issues prevalent in school-based research. These include issues relating to processes of informed consent and possible harm to individuals who are approached for participation. In relation to the current study, I was aware that parents may have chosen to participate without wanting their child to do so. Conversely, a young person may have consented to take part without wanting their parent(s) to be interviewed. In situations where parents had agreed to participate, it also seemed ethical and appropriate to seek the approval of their child,

since the parent would be speaking to me about the young person. Felzmann (2009, p. 105) suggests that, in such cases, "*refusal trumps acceptance i.e. the party that refuses is generally given priority"* and it was made clear to parents that a young person was not obliged to participate, even if parental consent had been given for them to do so. Similarly, it was decided that, if a young person did not want their parent to participate in the research, the young person's refusal would 'trump' parental acceptance. The range of consent configurations were considered and outlined on student information sheets and all participant consent forms. These are presented in Appendices 7, 9 11 and 12.

Felzmann (2009) also suggests that consent may be affected by the school context. Firstly, YP and parents may feel obliged to participate in research due to their perception of schools as authoritative. In relation to the current research, I was mindful that participants were contacted by the school's attendance officer, an individual they may have associated with particular measures for non-compliance in the past. Secondly, Felzmann (2009) asserts that YP may feel obliged to participate in school-based research due to the perception that research participation is akin to participation in school-based activities, during which their participation is expected. In terms of the current research, I reiterated the voluntary nature of participation to school staff, parents and YP, through written and verbal communication, in the hope that participants did not feel obliged to take part. During the research process, parents and YP were informed of their right to withdraw from the research and were reminded that the information they shared would remain anonymous.

Psychological and social risks were also associated with the recruitment process for the current study and seemed particularly important to consider given the emotive nature of the research topic. Felzmann (2009) suggests that emotional upset may be difficult to avoid in school-based research, especially given a lack of information about individual contexts, and outlines that participants may become upset due to confrontation with sensitive or emotionally evocative topics. Two YP decided not to take part in the research for this reason, highlighting the psychological risk associated with the research. In both situations, and in line with advice from Felzmann (2009), I ensured that YP and their parents were in touch with relevant school staff in case of ongoing issues or concerns and asked parents to reassure their children, on my behalf, that their decisions had not caused upset and that they

were, in no way, obliged to take part in the research. In relation to issues around consent, the decisions of these two YP may reflect that they did not feel pressurised to participate and felt choice and control over the matter.

3.9.4 Rationale for sample size

Having outlined my approach to recruiting participants for the current research and some of the ethical issues raised by this, I will now go on to consider the sample size for the research and describe the participants who agreed to take part.

Given difficulties with recruiting participants, the sample size for the current research was lower than anticipated. Two YP and three parents agreed to take part in the study from one secondary school. Patton (2002, p. 244) asserts that *"there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry"* and suggests that sample size can be influenced by what will be useful, credible and realistic within a specific time-frame. Originally, it was deemed that three YP and between three to six parents or carers (one or two parent(s)/carer(s) per young person) would be an appropriate sample size for the current research, given the time-limited nature of the research and the relatively narrow population of YP. I wanted to ensure that I had enough data to tell a rich story, but not too much that the data could not be engaged with in a complex way (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). Little evidence exists within the literature relating to the ideal number of participants necessary for processes of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Bushe, 2011). Previous similar research in the context of ESNA, which has focused on eliciting the views of YP and parents, has used relatively small sample sizes, focusing on case studies of two YP (Nuttall & Woods, 2013) or five secondary-aged YP (Grandison, 2011).

3.9.5 Participant profiles

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants (Bryman, 2016) and participants were selected based on their experiences with school attendance in accordance with the recruitment criteria (see 3.9.1), with the belief that they would have insights which were most relevant to the research questions and aims. In this section I will provide a brief outline of each participant who agreed to take part in the study, with the hope of providing some insight into participant backgrounds and supporting readers to interpret findings with some understanding of participants' individuality and contexts.

It is important to note, however, that detailed backgrounds of participants have not provided in this section to protect anonymity. Pseudonyms for participants have also been used.

The first young person who took part in the study was Jamie.

Jamie was a 15-year-old boy in Year 11 who had experienced difficulties with attendance throughout Year 10. Jamie lived at home with his mother, father and older sister. Both of Jamie's parents suffered from poor health and his mum had recently been unwell. Jamie liked playing sports, especially rugby, and he enjoyed maths at school. He spoke to me about his on-going worries about his mum's health and seemed aware of the impact his school non-attendance had had on the family. Jamie seemed pragmatic about his return to school and seemed to want to get on with his school work.

The first parent who took part in the study was Donna.

Donna was Jamie's mother. She seemed appreciative of the support she had received from school and other professionals in relation to Jamie's attendance. Donna conceptualised Jamie's ESNA as 'separation anxiety'. Donna described Jamie as a typical teenager now that he had returned to school and explained that he was currently choosing which subjects he might study in sixth form.

The second young person who took part in the study was Ben.

Ben was a 13-year-old boy in Year 8. Ben had experienced difficulties with his attendance throughout Year 7. Ben explained that he had found it difficult to make friends at school and described still finding friendships difficult at the time of the research. Ben liked playing on his Xbox and enjoyed speaking to friends he had made online through gaming.

The second and third parents who took part in the study were Sarah and Steve.

Sarah and Steve were Ben's parents. Sarah and Steve described that Ben's older brother, David, had also experienced difficulties with school attendance. They perceived that Ben's difficulties were linked with a lack of friendships at school and explained that they felt they had been proactive in seeking support for Ben.

3.9.6 School profile

Due to difficulties with recruitment, Jamie and Ben both attended the same school, School B. School B was a mixed rural secondary school of around 1,300 pupils. The school was well known by the Educational Psychology Service for its strong sense of community and ethos of warmth, care and support. School B were known for supporting the emotional wellbeing of YP through their onsite centre 'the hub', a specific centre within school with dedicated pastoral staff. The overall attendance of YP at School B had improved over the previous two years and attendance of students was above the national average overall.

3.10 Data collection

Before interviewing parents and YP, I ensured they were clear about what would happen during the research process. Information sheets were provided and discussed with participants, ensuring they had the opportunity to ask questions and that they understood their participation before consenting. It was important to me that participants felt as comfortable as possible during the research process. Interviews were therefore conducted at a time and location of participants' choosing. During the data collection process, I was aware of the sensitive and emotive nature of the experiences participants might be discussing and took appropriate measures to ensure that they felt supported during and after interviews. These measures will be further discussed in section 3.10.3. Following the suggestion of Robson (2011), it was hoped that pilot interviews would be carried out prior to interviews with participants, to allow for the refinement of questions and ensure they were understandable (Bryman, 2016). However, due to difficulties recruiting participants and time restrictions, pilot interviews were not conducted.

3.10.1 The use of appreciative semi-structured interviews

The appreciative interview lies *"at the heart of Appreciative Inquiry"* (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 14) and can take place on a whole system or individual level between individual researchers and participants. The appreciative interview seeks to highlight and explore people's peak experiences; *"times when they were most*

engaged, most alive, and proudest of themselves."" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p. 278) and encourage the creation of meaning between individuals.

Considering this co-construction of meaning and the philosophical underpinnings of the current research, semi-structured interviews were deemed to be the most appropriate method of data collection for the current research. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006, p. 315) highlight the opportunity semi-structured interviews offer to *"delve deeply into social and personal matters"* and Grindsted (2005, p. 1015) proposes that they can further offer *"insight into how people attribute meaning to their worlds in social interaction."* In semi-structured interviewing, the researcher develops an interview protocol, with five to seven open-ended questions or themes, which they use to structure the interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Each question may have prompts or sub-questions which can be used by the interviewer if deemed necessary (Rowley, 2012). In this way, the framework of a semi-structured interview for the current research ensured that participants had the freedom to speak in an unstructured way about the factors they considered to be most important and further allowed me, as the researcher, the flexibility to ask follow-up questions, clarify points or prompt participants with additional questions in response to what they said (Bryman, 2016).

The constructivist underpinnings of the research also had implications for the way in which interviews were viewed. Rather than viewing knowledge as 'out there', ready to be 'discovered' and compared with an objective world, I considered that knowledge was constructed, interpreted and remoulded during interviews (Kvale, 1996). Kvale (1996) suggests that this process can offer a space for participant reflection and become emancipatory or transformative for participants who begin to recognise their power in situations in which they had previously perceived themselves to be powerless. It is important to consider, however, that despite this possibility, interviews may not have led to increased participant power in terms of decision-making or social action due to the constrained contexts in which participants existed.

3.10.2 Data collection procedure

Interviews with three participants (Jamie, Donna and Ben) were carried out at school B. The other two participants (Sarah and Steve) decided that they would like to be

interviewed at their home. Interviews lasted between 22 minutes and 1 hour 3 minutes. Before interviews started, I spent time building rapport with each participant by asking questions about them and their areas of personal interest. Through this, I hoped to create an environment in which each participant felt comfortable to share their experiences with me.

The interview schedule used for the current research was framed within the Discovery and Dream phases of AI and focused on the following areas:

1) Appreciating the return to school

2) Appreciating the current experience of school

3) Desired vision for the future for extended school non-attenders and their parents

Interview schedules used with YP and parents can be found in Appendices 13 and 14.

In line with the suggestions of Watkins and Mohr (2001), who wrote about interviews in AI, I aimed to do the following during the interview process:

- Use affirmative language, describing what is wanted rather than what is unwanted
- Explain the positive intent of questions
- Use all-encompassing definitions so that participants could make their own meaning of the question
- Present questions as an invitation to tell stories rather than an inquisition about facts or opinions
- Value ‘what is’ and facilitate the identification of affirmative experiences
- communicate unconditional concern and encouragement for the individual and their involvement

To support the elicitation of the views of YP during interviews, visual aids and activities were used alongside the topic guide. I provided YP with A3 paper and pens so that they could draw a visual timeline of events in relation to their school attendance. I further used a scaling activity which focused on eliciting perceived differences between periods of ESNA and school re-attendance. Finally, a card sort

activity was used, whereby I gave YP a number of blank cards and asked them to label a prioritise factors they perceived were helpful in supporting their return to school. I asked YP to arrange these factors into a pyramid shape, with the factors they perceived to be most important at the top and the factors they perceived to be least important across the bottom.

3.10.3 Ethical implications of the data collection process

Whilst Bushe (2011) asserts that most people enjoy being interviewed appreciatively, Kvale (1996; 2008) and Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) highlight possible ethical issues present in the interview process, including the management of any participant stress and the inherent power dynamic present during interview. As outlined in section 3.7.3, although framed positively, AI interviews may evoke negative feelings about the past or present (Bushe, 2011). Within this research, measures were taken to ensure that participants felt supported during and following the interview in the event that they felt any distress. A relevant supportive individual within or outside of school was identified as someone who participants could speak to should they have felt upset. Participants were also informed that they did not have to answer questions they did not feel comfortable with and were aware that they could pause or discontinue the interview at any time. YP were provided with coloured cards to signal possible distress during interview, an orange card if they wished to pause the interview and a red card if they wished to stop it completely. I was also sensitive to signs of ongoing consent throughout the interview. Time was created to debrief after the interview in order that participants had the opportunity to share how they had found the interview and to discuss any further issues.

I also aimed to use a collaborative approach during interviews, in order to address the inherent power dynamic present between myself as an interviewer and participants as interviewees. Hammersley and Gomm (2008) highlight that, based on this dynamic, participants may give answers based on their perceptions of what they believe the researcher wants to hear or what they feel comfortable enough to share. I told participants that there was no right or wrong answer to questions and wanted to approach questions with them equally in a process of exploration with them.

3.11 Data analysis

The quality of qualitative research depends on the analysis of data being systematic, transparent and generating new insights. Having described the way in which data was collected, the next section of the chapter aims to outline the systematic way in which data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis.

3.11.1 Thematic analysis

In keeping with the philosophical underpinnings of the research, an inductive approach to data analysis was selected in order that the meanings participants gave to their experiences could be considered. Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) highlight that meaning-making in AI generally occurs over time, gives attention to the experiences of participants, and encourages researchers to focus on the voices of individuals, as well as on common themes. Thematic analysis was used as the method of data analysis for the current research due to its compatibility with meaning-making in AI and the underpinning social constructivist-interpretivist philosophy of the research.

Described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 6) as *"a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data"*, thematic analysis can be applied across a range of research paradigms and used to answer almost any type of qualitative research question (Braun & Clarke, 2013), with the hope of producing findings which are accessible to the public. Although a range of different types of thematic analysis exist (Attride-Stirling, 2001), Braun and Clarke's (2006) offers theoretical flexibility and emphasises the active role of the researcher as a reflexive individual within the process. Braun and Clarke (2006) distinguish between semantic and latent thematic analysis. A semantic approach focuses on the explicit surface meaning of words analysed, whereas a latent approach goes beyond this, aiming to understand underlying meanings articulated within the data. Following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), an inductive latent thematic analysis was used. This meant that data analysis was driven by the data itself rather than preconceived theoretical ideas about what might be generated from the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) note, however, that elements of 'top down' interpretation may occur during thematic analysis based on the researcher's prior knowledge. Although I did not frame my analysis according the specific pre-conceived ideas; my beliefs,

values and existing knowledge of the literature may have influenced what I perceived to be meaningful within the data. It is therefore important to note that the analysis cannot be viewed as completely latent or 'bottom up.'

Following the six phases of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, data was analysed manually, rather than through software packages, such an NVivo, although these were considered. Ryan and Bernard (2003) emphasise the relevance of manual analysis for inductive research in which the sample size is small, suggesting that it allows researchers to familiarise themselves with the data and manually move codes into potential groups or themes.

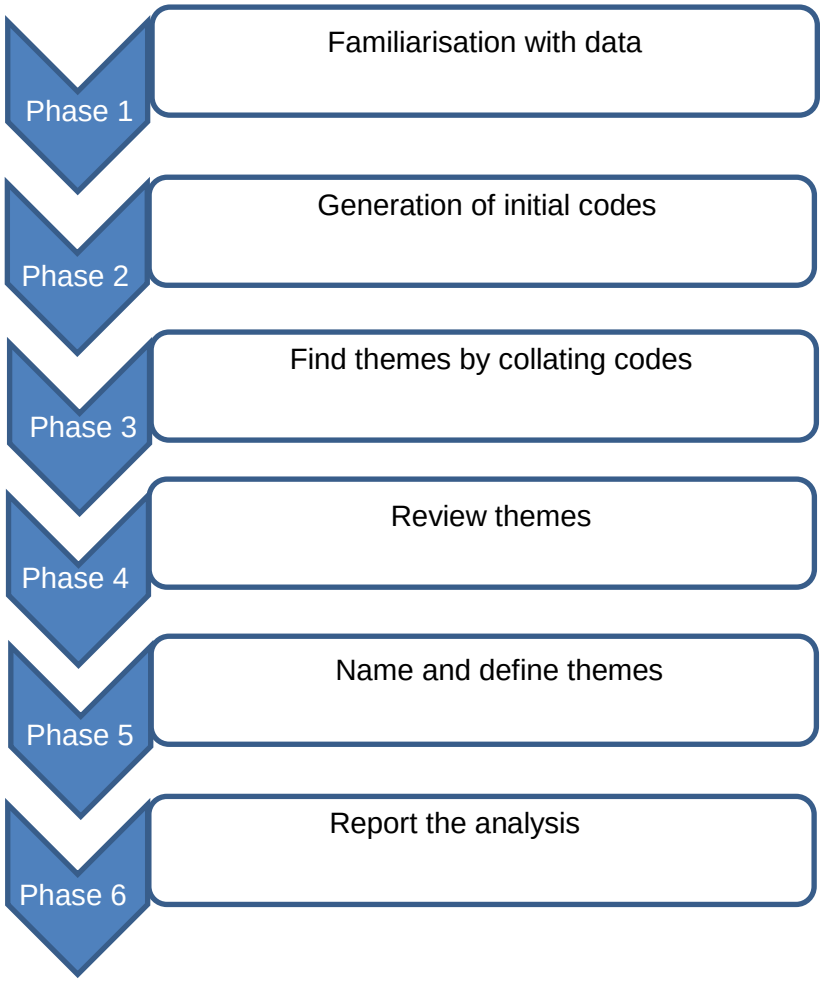

Figure 2: The 6 phases of thematic analysis (based on Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Based on the first five phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), I initially began by becoming familiar with the data. I transcribed, read and re-read the data, highlighting transcribed text and noting down initial interpretations and ideas. This allowed me to immerse myself in the data and gain an understanding of the voices of each participant. Initial ideas or codes were generated from the entire data set. Below, Table 5 provides two examples of how data extracts were coded.

Voice	Transcription	Codes
Donna	Um, he started in, um (.) a coupla mornings, a week doing what he wanted to do	Gradual return Jamie's choice/control
Researcher	Okay	
Donna	Um and he was doing that for a couple of weeks. And then they changed it to a bit more, an' then for some I don't know what happened, but he went back again	Some school control Unsure of triggers Sense of 'relapse' with attendance
Researcher	He came back home for a bit, or went back to school?	
Donna	No, he went back to refusing	A sense of 're-lapse', on-going difficulties with attendance

Voice	Transcription	Codes
Ben	Like (.) try and be nicer to them	Friendship difficulties in the past (peers were not nice to Ben)
Researcher	Okay so being nicer, and what would that look like, being nicer	
Ben	Like helping them if they're stuck (.) or just talking to them	Sense of social isolation 'just talking to them': desiring basic social interaction from peers

Table 5: Examples of data coding

To ensure rigour at this stage of data analysis, my thesis supervisor and I discussed our interpretations of extracts I believed to be particularly rich with codes. Each code was assigned a number, and sections of transcripts were cut, sorted (Ryan and Bernard, 2003) and organised into meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005). This was done manually using an excel spreadsheet. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that, at this stage, it is important to work through the whole data set again, giving equal attention to each code and looking at repeated patterns (themes) across the data. Codes were then combined and sorted into broader overarching themes. I did this manually by writing each code on a post-it note and combining them on separate pieces of A3

paper to consider the best way to group them into subthemes and themes. Appendix 15 shows the initial themes I identified at this stage of the thematic analysis.

I then reviewed the themes. I discarded those I did not believe to have sufficient evidence and split or combined some themes. The initial themes, 'access to external agencies' and 'having a system of support within school' were combined, for example, to create the theme 'practical support.' Ensuring that themes answered the research questions supported this process. Silverman (1993) highlights the importance of ensuring that findings represent a critical analysis of the whole data set and are not purely based on a few select examples. I therefore considered whether I felt that the final themes accurately represented the data by reading the entire data set again and contemplating the overall story of the data. Once I felt confident that my themes reflected the data, I assigned them names and defined them. The above process was recursive, and I moved back and forth between phases over a number of months between February and May 2018.

3.11.2 Possible criticisms of thematic analysis

In spite of its use across a range of research paradigms, Braun and Clarke (2006, p.180) acknowledge that thematic analysis can compromise *"the continuity and contradictions within individual accounts"* and Holloway and Jefferson (2000) further assert that context can be lost by fragmenting data into codes and themes. For this reason, it was important for me to keep the over-arching stories of individuals in mind during the data analysis process and revisit the entire data set multiple times to ensure that I felt that the themes were representative of the data. I also ensured that my interpretations were based on extracts from the data and considered alterative interpretations throughout, acknowledging contradictions and complexity.

Some researchers suggest that, to seek patterns across data, a minimum number of participants should exist in relation to each theme. Guidance published by Fugard and Potts (2015), for example, suggests that the more specific the sample of individuals, the larger the sample size should be, in order that a 'relevant number' of instances of a theme are 'unearthed' from the data. In relation to the current study, which focused on a specific population of individuals, Fugard and Potts (2015, p. 675) might argue that a larger sample size was necessary to ensure that *"relevant experiences"* which applied to most participants were 'unearthed' within the analysis.

Due to the nature of the sample for the current study, which could be grouped into two YP and three parents, some subthemes identified during data analysis were only applicable to one group i.e. two or three parents and it could be argued, by Fugard and Potts (2015), that this number was not satisfactory for the creation of a theme. Braun and Clarke (2016), however, argue that Fugard and Potts' (2015) guidance should be treated with caution. Firstly, Fugard and Potts' (2015) approach suggests that themes are 'out there' in the data, waiting to be discovered, a conceptualisation which does not sit alongside more constructivist approaches to thematic analysis. Secondly, Braun and Clarke (2016) argue that 'theme relevance' and a focus on a 'relevant number' of instances in relation to a theme may be irrelevant in qualitative research which focuses on participant voice, the depth and richness of qualitative data, and its relevance to addressing research questions. Morse's (2000) consideration of sample size also highlights the importance of depth and richness in qualitative data. She proposes that shadowed data i.e. data in which participants discuss the experiences of others can add to data richness, regardless of participant sample size. This seemed particularly relevant for the current study, during which parents commented on the experiences of their children and vice versa, adding to the potential quality of data (Morse, 2000). Ethical considerations, the availability of participants and researcher time also influenced the sample size of the current study, aspects which Fugard and Potts (2015) fail to account for in their guidance, but which were considered of importance in the current study.

3.12 Ethical considerations in data analysis

Having considered the use of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis in the current study, including possible criticisms, the ethical considerations linked with its use will now be considered before the chapter is summarised.

3.12.1 Generalisation

Findings from the current research were not intended to be generalised across populations, rather they reflected the individual experiences of participants within their social contexts. It was hoped, however, that findings might inform the development of further support for extended non-attenders through the generation of

new concepts or practice. Yin (2013) writes about this approach to generalisation in relation to case study research, suggesting that studies which focus on gaining a rich understanding of a phenomena from a small group of participants builds 'analytic' generalisation, which aims to shed light on a theoretical concept or modify or advance practice.

3.12.2 The role of the researcher in analysis (reflexivity)

Within social constructivist-interpretivist research, the researcher is highlighted as an active participant in the research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), not only in the joint construction of knowledge during the research interview (Grindsted, 2005) but also through the analysis of data. In line with Braun and Clarke (2006), Potter and Hepburn (2005) assert that the beliefs and interests of the researcher may influence data interpretation and suggest that researchers should be explicit about the way in which they interpreted data. My own beliefs, assumptions and experiences, outlined in section 3.5, will have informed the way in which I analysed and presented the data. This element of the current research will be discussed further in chapter 4.

3.13 Chapter summary

The current research aimed to identify what YP and parents found helpful in supporting YP to return to school following a period of ESNA. The first two stages of Appreciative Inquiry were used to conduct interviews with YP and their parents, individuals who had relevant experience of returning to school following ESNA. Semi-structured interviews were used to find out what participants perceived was helpful in their situations and what they would recommend in terms of support for other extended school non-attenders and their parents. This chapter outlined the underpinning epistemological and ontological position of the research and the way in which this informed the research methodology, methods of data collection and the use of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Ethical implications of the research process were considered throughout the chapter. The next chapter presents the findings of the current research.

4. Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will present findings from the thematic analysis of the data collected from participant interviews. Four interviews were conducted with participants in November 2017. I interviewed two young people (YP), Jamie and Ben at school. Jamie's mother, Donna, was also interviewed in the school setting. Ben's parents, Sarah and Steve, were interviewed together at home. Data from the interviews was analysed and themes were identified in response to the two research questions;

1) What do secondary-aged young people, who have returned to school following a period of extended school non-attendance, and their parents, perceive was helpful in supporting young people to return to school?

2) What do these secondary-aged young people, and their parents, perceive to be desirable support for extended school non-attenders and their parents and what would they like to see implemented in the future?

Research Question 1 related to the 'Discovery' phase of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), exploring the 'best of what was' in relation to factors YP and their parents perceived as helpful in supporting the young person's return to school.

Research Question 2 related to the 'Dream' phase of AI, exploring what participants perceived as desirable support, or 'what might be' supportive for extended school non-attenders and their parents in the future.

In keeping with an inductive approach to thematic analysis, themes generated from the data were not framed according to pre-conceived theoretical ideas. The themes presented in the current chapter were identified by focusing on the voices of individuals and the meaning they gave to their experiences. With this in mind, the number of participants who spoke about a specific theme have not been reported in the current chapter. As outlined in section 3.11.2, it could be argued that reporting on the number of participants to whom a theme was relevant may sit within a quantitative research paradigm and detract from the depth and richness of the data and its relevance to addressing the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2015).

It is important to note that, although interview questions were framed in an appreciative way, in keeping with the research methodology, some participants naturally spoke about their negative experiences of support. Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2010) warn that this is a common occurrence within AI research. As recommended by Coghlan et al. (2003), rather than ignore these negative experiences, I aimed to re-frame them so that inferences could be made about what might work better for individuals in the future. For example, Ben, spoke about his sense of social isolation at school, and suggested that he would find it supportive for his peers to talk to him more. Although Ben outlined his negative experience, it was inferred that he would have found it supportive to have felt less socially isolated at school, a factor which could be seen as supporting his school attendance. Bellinger and Elliott (2011, p. 713) suggest that, by viewing negative experiences within the positive framework of AI, *"creative and innovative alternatives can be explored"* and contribute to thinking about what could be better in the future.

Five themes were identified from the data, each with a number of sub-themes. During this chapter, each theme will be described to give an idea of what it represents. Individual sub-themes will then be explored, using direct quotes from participants to illustrate specific points. Direct participant quotes are written in bold italics throughout the chapter. As outlined in chapter 3, pseudonyms were given to participants to preserve participant anonymity. Participant profiles are outlined in section 3.9.5, giving some insight into participants and their individual contexts and backgrounds. Chapter 5 will use the themes explored in the current chapter to directly answer the research questions.

Given the complexity of individual experience, some of the themes and sub-themes presented are inter-related. These relationships will be highlighted throughout the coming chapter and explored in more detail in chapter 5.

The five main themes identified from the data analysis were:

Theme 1: The importance of relationships

Theme 2: The control, agency and voices of young people

Theme 3: Understanding parental experiences of ESNA

Theme 4: Practical support

Theme 5: Perceptions about the nature of ESNA

4.2 Theme 1: The importance of relationships

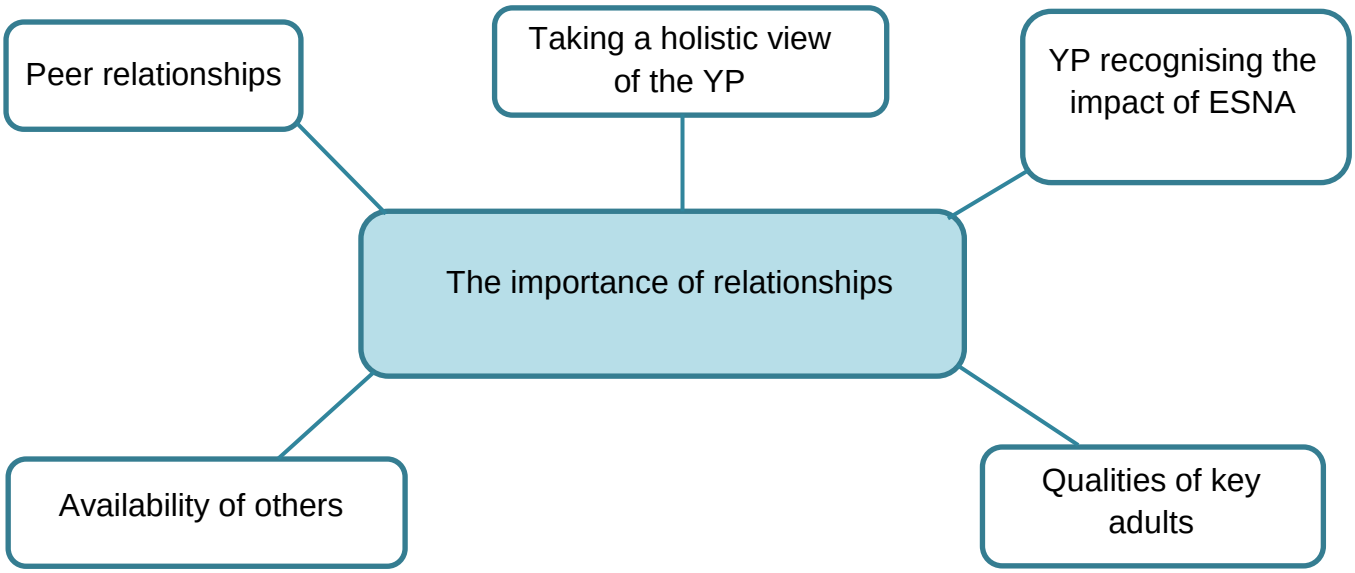

Figure 3: Theme 1: The importance of relationships

The first theme, 'the importance of relationships' describes the supportive nature of relationships for YP and their parents. Relationships with others, including those with parent and student peers, family members, school staff and professionals were perceived to be important in supporting YP to return to school following a period of extended school non-attendance (ESNA), and parents in situations of ESNA.

The theme represents five sub-themes. The first sub-theme *'peer relationships'* touches upon the way in which positive relationships with other YP and parents were perceived as supportive and motivating by participants. The second sub-theme focuses on *'YP recognising the impact of ESNA'* and the way in which this may have supported a return to school. The third sub-theme recognises that *'taking a holistic view of the young person'* was perceived as helpful in supporting more regular school attendance and the fourth sub-theme *'qualities of key adults'* highlights that participants valued particular positive characteristics of individuals who supported them. The fifth and final sub-theme describes the way in which *'the availability of*

others', including the availability of key adults and external agencies, were perceived as supportive by participants.

4.2.1 Sub-theme: Peer relationships

Relationships with peers, both for YP and their parents, were spoken about as important during interviews. YP told me about the supportive nature of genuine, positive relationships with their peers and a desire to overcome feelings of social isolation and abandonment during ESNA. Parents too spoke about appreciating relationships with other parents in similar situations and suggested that this could be encouraged further in the future.

Jamie described that he had valued the opportunity to socialise with his peers again once he had returned to school. He recommended that other YP, returning to school following ESNA, should seek to spend time with peers who they had long-term, genuine relationships with.

> **Jamie:** ***"Surround yourself with friends, not your mates. There's a difference sort of thing.. friends are people who you're gonna know for ages"***

Donna, Jamie's mum, also highlighted the supportive nature of Jamie's ***"good friends… who've stuck by him"*** suggesting that she and Jamie appreciated peers who remained supportive of Jamie, even though he was not at school.

In spite of this, both Jamie and Ben suggested that they had felt abandoned by their peers during periods of ESNA, suggesting that they may have found it supportive to have been in more regular contact with their friends during times when they had been absent from school.

> **Jamie:** ***"Yeah but I think, as they sort of, as I didn't come in as much I think they [friends] sort of, not gave up, but just generally didn't talk"***

In response to a question about what peers could do to support a young person's return to school, Ben suggested that others could make an effort to talk to YP or support them if they're stuck with school work.

> **Ben:** ***"helping them if they're stuck, or just talking to them"***

Steve, Ben's dad, also suggested that supporting Ben's peer relationships may, in turn, support his school attendance, acting as a motivating factor for him. When asked what Ben's school could do to further support him, Steve answered:

> **Steve:** ***"if they [school] could sort of look at this now this friendship side that would sort of be a positive side, um, for Ben cos then he would, he's got something to go to school for"***

Ben's parents, Sarah and Steve, and Jamie's mum, Donna, also spoke about the supportive nature of peer relationships with other parents in similar situations. Donna highlighted that she found it supportive talking to another local parent who had also experienced ESNA with her daughter. Sarah and Steve told me that they had found it supportive to talk to other parents during a parenting class they had attended.

> **Steve:** ***"we found that, you know, it was quite nice to talk to other parents"***

Steve and Sarah also suggested that setting up relationships between parents whose children are experiencing difficulties with attendance may be supportive for others in the future, both in terms of emotional and practical support.

> **Steve:** ***"you should be able to say right, you're [parents] invited to this evening at seven o'clock, come to the hall and there might be twenty parents there who have all got children, and then you could say well I've tried this and I've tried this, that would be quite useful. You know, there could be a parent down the road who's going through exactly the same things as we are. You know we feel that we're on our own and they probably feel that they're on their own"***
>
> **Sarah:** ***"Cos I don't think it matters who you talk to, if they haven't been through it, they can't understand"***

4.2.2 Sub-theme: Young people recognising the impact ESNA

My interviews with Jamie and his mum, Donna, suggested that Jamie's recognition of the emotional impact of his ESNA on his family had supported his return to school. Jamie reflected on the way in which his ESNA had impacted upon the whole family, and Donna told me that Jamie had been motivated to return to school when he realised the emotional impact his behaviour was having on her.

> **Jamie:** ***"I mean, it's not just <u>me</u> that's affected by me coming to school, it's my, if my dad's unhappy about me not coming to school it then relates to my mum getting upset, cos my dad's upset and then my sister gets upset because my mum's upset and then I get upset because my mum's upset which, works itself up"***
>
> **Donna:** ***"he saw the state I was getting into every morning because of what he was doing"***

Jamie also recognised that the situation at home had been ***"happier"*** since his return to school. Both Jamie and Donna also spoke about the way in which Jamie's recognition of the legal and financial implications of his ESNA for Donna had supported his return to school.

> **Jamie:** ***"like if I don't come to school mum's gonna get fined and if she can't pay the fine she's gonna go to prison, that was it."***
>
> **Donna:** ***"I think it was the threat of legal action, court and things that sort of like woke him up a bit"***

Jamie seemed to benefit from adult facilitation to reflect on the impact of his non-attendance. As outlined in section 4.2.4, the honesty of Jamie's social worker, with whom he had a good relationship, about the possible consequences of his non-attendance for his mother seemed to support his reflection on this.

4.2.3 Sub-theme: Taking a holistic view of the young person

The sub-theme ‘taking a holistic view of the young person’ seemed particularly pertinent for Jamie, who cited his sessions with his social worker as one of the most important factors which had supported his return to school. He spoke at length about his relationship with his social worker and the positive impact of her taking an interest in him.

> **Jamie: “*I found it easier with the social workers before, I had one before and it's just easier with them because they talk to you as a person not as like a therapist would like, sort of, an object if you know what I mean”***

This personal and holistic approach to support, in which Jamie felt treated as a person, seemed to be supportive for him and he went on to describe the way in which he had appreciated the approach taken by the social worker. He told me that he and his social worker had taken trips together and Jamie seemed to value this time, which he viewed as a break from home and school.

> **Jamie: *“it was sort of like a break as well, getting away from, she didn’t talk about school she just sort of talked as if I were a mate sort of thing. Not like, just one subject constantly, it was different”***

Jamie also told me that he appreciated that conversation between himself and his social worker had focused on his aspirations and motivations for the future, rather than purely on a need to return to school.

> **Jamie: *“so she talked about what I wanted to do outside of school and the future and stuff and I found that easier and it got me thinking, and she did link it back to school but it got me in a bit of a better mind-set”***

Jamie directly contrasted this less direct and more holistic approach to a more direct approach which, he told me, he had found difficult to engage with.

Jamie: ***"Like if someone comes into a room an' it's just a bland room and two chairs and it's just like how are you feeling today and honestly I just hate that sort of thing"***

Steve, Ben's dad, also suggested that a less direct approach, which focused on taking an interest in the young person, may be supportive. When asked about desired support for extended school non-attenders he articulated:

Steve: ***"I think you almost have to say right let's talk about everything other than school, you obviously want to talk about school but that's kind of a long way away."***

Donna, Jamie's mum, cited that it had been supportive for Jamie and his social worker to engage in activities outside of the house.

Donna: ***"She'd take him out, um go up to Brookhill Hub, it's the local coffee shop type of thing and sit and chat with him"***

Steve also suggested that engaging in activities outside of the house may be supportive, proposing that professionals could get Ben out of the house by going to walk the dog with him or taking him to McDonald's.

Steve: "*but just take him somewhere, I dunno McDonald's to get him out, away from something official"*

Jamie highlighted that he had found it supportive that a relative had taken an interest in him during his ESNA and had recognised his efforts in relation to attendance. Speaking about his great aunt he told me:

Jamie: ***"and it'd be nice for her to say just, sort of to my mum, oh say well done and it was just sort of nice to hear"***

4.2.4 Sub-theme: Qualities of key adults

Participants told me about the supportive qualities of key individuals who they had worked with during experiences of ESNA. These included individuals who were regarded as genuine, nice, honest and respectful, and those who participants felt had listened to them. Donna cited listening as the quality she perceived as most important in her supportive relationships with professionals.

> **Donna:** ***"It's the way they talk, the way they understand, the way they <u>listen</u> is a good thing. Yeah that's the main thing, the listening"***

She also noted that professionals she found supportive were those who she felt were genuine. When speaking about Jamie's youth worker, she described,

> **Donna:** ***"she was lovely as well. She was really down to earth and things"***

Ben also cited that the qualities of key adults had supported his return to school. When I asked him about what he felt had changed between his period of ESNA and his return to school, Ben told me that ***"nicer teachers"*** were a motivating factor for him, suggesting that the qualities of his teachers were perceived as supportive.

Jamie seemed to appreciate honesty within his relationships. Referring to his social worker, he told me that she was honest about the legal and financial implications for his mum as a result of his ESNA:

> **Jamie:** ***"like, she told me how it is, therapist sort of, everything's rainbows and sunshine but the social worker told me how it is"***

Jamie also told me that he had found certain professionals ***"patronising"*** and preferred more reciprocally respectful relationships in which professionals ***"talked as if I was a mate"***. The above qualities were evident in the answers participants gave about desired support for extended school non-attenders. Jamie recommended, for example, that he would prefer support from individuals who were genuine and responsive to the needs of YP.

Jamie: *"Just chill out, cos it's just annoying when you're trying to be too happy and bring that happy energy or something like that into it. Just be normal"*

4.2.5 Sub-theme: Availability of others

The availability of others as sources of support seemed important to Jamie, who described that he had found it helpful that his great aunt and sister had 'been there' for him.

Jamie: ***"She [sister] was just there, if I need help with homework, she's there, if I need help with maths or something, she's there"***

Jamie's advice for others who work with a YP experiencing ESNA was simply, ***"be there"*** suggesting that he valued key adults who were available for him when he perceived he needed support. This sub-theme also described a desire for external agencies to be more readily available to parents and YP. Sarah and Steve, Ben's parents, told me that they would have found it helpful for external agencies to have been more easily accessible. They told me that they found some external agencies difficult to access due to a lack of Ben's externalising or extreme behaviours and felt that external agencies had not being interested in supporting Ben because he didn't seem to meet their specific criteria.

Sarah: ***"We didn't really get any help from anybody and the reason they said we weren't getting any help was because Ben was really good at school. There were no behaviour issues, he wasn't making disturbances in the class, he wasn't being aggressive to anybody, he was very polite to all teachers if, if he had been um bad… we would have got help… he was just a non-attender"***

4.2.6 Theme summary

A range of factors relating to relationships with others were perceived by participants to play an important role in supporting YP's return to school following ESNA. Peer

relationships at school were perceived as a motivating factor in promoting school attendance for YP, and parents and YP highlighted that facilitation of these relationships to reduce social isolation may be beneficial in supporting YP to return to school. Parents also suggested that they would find relationships with other parents supportive, in terms of practical and emotional support. YP themselves recognising the impact of their ESNA, especially on their family, seemed to also support a return to school. Individuals who were considered genuine, honest, respectful, who demonstrated good listening skills and showed an interest in the young person were considered supportive. One young person particularly appreciated sharing his motivations and aspirations and the opportunity to take a break from school and home with a key adult by taking trips with her. This young person also valued key individuals being available when he felt he needed them. In contrast, parents perceived external agencies as less available due to rigid criteria. This suggests that parents may have valued a more individualised and understanding approach to support, an aspect which will be explored under theme 3, 'understanding parental experiences of ESNA.'

4.3 Theme 2: The control, agency and voices of young people

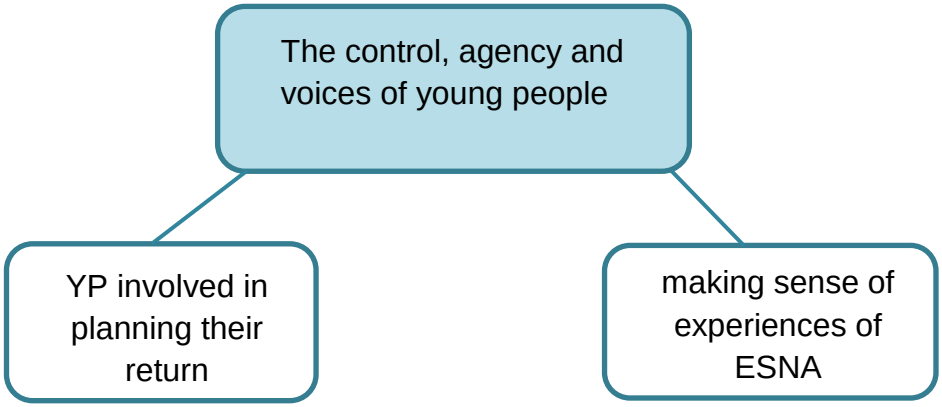

Figure 4: Theme 2: The control, agency and voices of young people

The second theme, 'the control, agency and voices of young people' embodies the supportive way in which YP were given control and agency during their return to school and the importance of creating space and time for YP to make sense of their experiences with ESNA. The first sub-theme, *'YP involved in planning their return',*

details the way in which this involvement seemed to support a return to school for YP. The second sub-theme, *'making sense of experiences with ESNA',* describes YP's confusion about their experiences with ESNA and the importance of YP being supported to express their views and make sense of their experiences.

4.3.1 Sub-theme: Young people involved in planning their return

Having an element of choice and control in relation to returning to school was perceived by Jamie, and his mother Donna, as supporting Jamie's return to school. Jamie told me that he valued being able to choose which lessons he attended on returning to school.

> **Jamie:** ***"they just let me choose times, they didn't sort of force it on me, I could choose the lessons that I felt more comfortable in, to come to"***
>
> **Donna:** ***"he started in, um a coupla mornings a week doing what he wanted to do"***

4.3.2 Sub-theme: Making sense of experiences of ESNA

A quote by Jamie captured the way in which he wished that his voice had been listened to by others during his ESNA and return to school.

> **Jamie:** ***"It's like if you went to McDonald's and someone's trying to sing the McDonald's chant every time you're trying to order. Just shut up and let me order"***

Although earlier, Jamie referred to the opportunity to express himself within his relationship with a social worker (4.2.3), the above quote suggests that he may not have always felt as though space was made for him to express his views in relation to his ESNA and the process of school re-attendance.

Jamie told me that he had felt, and still felt, unable to articulate why he had experienced difficulties with school attendance and advised that others should accept this answer when given by YP.

> **Jamie:** ***"I had no idea, still don't know. It's like, why am I here if I don't know, I just don't know"***

The above quote perhaps highlights Jamie's natural adolescent confusion regarding his situation and reinforces the need to give YP time, space and new skills, within a trusting relationship, to make sense of their experiences.

Parents reiterated that their children may have had difficulty making sense of their experiences and sharing their voices with others. Steve told me that his son, Ben, had ***"never said right, this is what the issue is"*** and Donna, Jamie's mum, told me:

> **Donna:** ***"I've tried to talk to him and he says I don't know, you ask him what's wrong and he'll say I don't know, he'll say if I don't know, you don't know"***

Steve suggested that it might be helpful for YP to be supported to make sense of their experiences, in order that support could be targeted.

> **Steve:** ***"I just think you've got to get the child talking, whether it's a social worker, whether it's an educational psychologist, whether it's someone at school, until you can underst-, you know strip it back and sort of say well what is the problem"***

4.3.3 Theme summary

Having agency and control in relation to his school attendance seemed to support Jamie to begin attending school more regularly again. Jamie spoke positively, for example, about being able to choose the lessons he attended as he returned. It also seemed important that space was created for YP to begin making sense of their experience with ESNA. Both Jamie and Ben seemed to have difficulty making sense of and talking about their experiences of ESNA and Jamie suggested that he would have liked the opportunity to express his views more openly.

4.4 Theme 3: Understanding parental experiences of ESNA

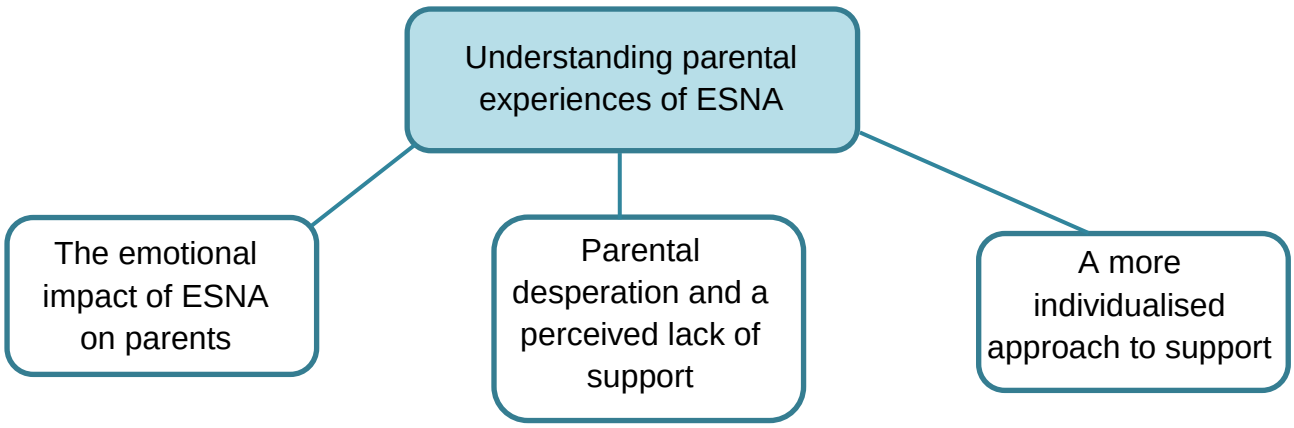

Figure 5: Theme 3: Understanding parental experiences of ESNA

The third theme, *'*understanding parental experiences of ESNA' embodies the negative impact of YP's ESNA on parents and describes the desperation felt by parents in relation to their situations. This theme also focuses on the way in which an improved understanding of parental experiences of ESNA may lead to a more individualised and flexible approach to support.

The theme represents three sub-themes. The first sub-theme, *'the emotional impact of ESNA on parents'* describes the negative emotional impact of YP's ESNA on parents, including the management of challenging physical behaviour of YP at home. The second sub-theme focuses on *'parental desperation and a perceived lack of support'*. It details feelings of powerlessness and desperation amongst parents who felt that there was no one to turn to in their situations. The sub-theme outlines some of the measures parents felt they had to resort to, to support their child's attendance at school, including the removal of enjoyable activities at home and initiating police involvement. This sub-theme links with parental perceptions that support was not easily available to them when they felt they needed it, captured in sub-themes 4.2.5 (the availability of others) and 4.5.4 (access to external agencies). The third sub-theme, *'a more individualised approach to support'* embodies parental experiences of a lack of individualisation throughout the support process and highlights that an increased understanding of parental experience may lead to a more flexible and personalised approach to support for parents and YP.

4.4.1 Sub-theme: The emotional impact of ESNA on parents

Parents generally described negative experiences of their child's ESNA. Sarah described her experience as a ***"living nightmare"***, and parents spoke about the negative impact of their child's ENSA on their emotional wellbeing. Donna, for example, described her emotional upset after taking her son, Jamie, into school during a period of his ESNA.

> **Donna:** ***"so when I had dropped him off and sort of like yanked him into the hub um, I would just go and sit in a lay-by for a bit and cry my eyes out"***

This was reiterated by Steve, who told me about parental upset at home.

> **Steve:** ***"he makes Sarah cry, um Sarah would be getting upset, you know I'd be getting upset"***

Sarah and Steve linked the emotional impact of their child's ESNA with feelings of pressure and parental conflict within the family. Steve told me, ***"I can see how it could split, even split parents up, the pressure"***.

For Sarah and Steve, the emotional impact of Ben's non-attendance was also linked with the management of his physical behaviour at home which they described as challenging.

> **Steve:** ***"in order to not go to school he [Ben] would become quite aggressive erm and this was like a defence you know, I think it was purely a defence mechanism. He would hit us, erm you know hit Sarah and he would um, throw things"***

4.4.2 Sub-theme: Parental desperation and a perceived lack of support

Both parents and YP described parents as seemingly powerless and desperate in their situations of ENSA, highlighting that parents may not have known what to do in their situations, and suggesting that support was not perceived as readily available. Both YP told me that they were initially able to 'do their own thing' whilst not

attending school, suggesting that parents may have felt powerless in being able to support their child's school attendance. Jamie told me that he felt that his mum was powerless because she seemed to 'give up' in relation to encouraging his school attendance, highlighting that Jamie's non-attendance may have felt relentless and exhausting for his mum.

> **Jamie:** ***"I mean, at that point my mum just sort of, I'm not gonna say gave up, but yeah gave up"***

This parental feeling was also expressed by Steve, who's feeling of powerlessness was apparent in the way in which he compared his son to a passive 'cushion', when trying to support his attendance.

> **Steve:** ***"it was almost like trying to get that cushion to go to school"***

This also highlighted that Steve may have been unsure of what to do in terms of supporting his son, Ben's, return to school.

Steve also described feelings of desperation in relation to Ben's ESNA. He told me that he felt that all options of support had been exhausted and spoke about his and Sarah's desperation and confusion about what to do next.

> **Steve:** ***"we'd reached the end of the road, I couldn't see any way forward"***

> **Steve:** ***"this hole was just getting deeper and deeper"***

His desperation for support was apparent in Steve's description of his management of the situation. Steve told me that he had felt that the only way forward, for him, was to call the police in relation to Ben's externalising behaviours and ESNA.

> **Steve:** ***"So I phoned 999 and I explained to them, this is our situation, you know this was when Ben was still being volatile um I said he's not in school, I'm worried he's gonna break things or he's gonna hit me"***

Steve perceived that involvement from the police and the ongoing threat of this had supported Ben's return to school. When asked, for example, what he felt had been most helpful in supporting Ben's improved attendance, Steve told me:

> **Steve:** ***"for us, it was ringing 999 and having those two policemen in Ben's room almost ready to sort of put him in the police van and drive him to school"***

Steve also told me that he thought that using the threat of police involvement in an ongoing manner to ensure Ben's attendance at school was useful.

> **Steve:** ***"I'll say look you need to go to school, you know what I'll do if you don't go to school, and he knows that I'll ring the police, so I literally get the phone, I show him that I'm dialling 101 and put it on speaker"***

With regards to this, it seemed as though Steve perceived this strategy to be successful because Ben had attended school every day since the police visit to the house.

> **Steve:** ***"And then he [Ben] went every day. It was like that sort of lightbulb moment"***

However, Steve also described Ben's physical behaviour in relation to police involvement, suggesting that Ben may have been resistant to it and may have felt unhappy.

> **Steve:** ***"he [Ben] was sat um by the door, they [the police] tried to push the door, this the door would give before Ben would give"***

He also described Ben as a ***"deer in headlights"*** in the face of the two policemen, suggesting that, although Steve may have perceived success in terms of Ben's physical attendance at school following police involvement, Ben may have felt unhappy and afraid and may have attended school through fear. The use of this strategy highlights the desperation of parents in relation to their children's attendance and suggests that YP may have returned to school unhappily, without being motivated to do so.

Moreover, Steve highlighted that support from the police was not ongoing, describing that he was unable to access support from them once Ben's behaviour had changed.

> ***Steve: "because we haven't got that hitting behaviour or that um criminal damage behaviour the police don't want to attend"***

Therefore, although Steve presented police involvement as a successful strategy in relation to Ben's attendance, it seems that this was linked with parental feelings of desperation and unhappiness and with a lack of ongoing support from services.

Parents also told me that they limited their children's engagement with enjoyable activities at home, in an attempt to support school attendance. Donna told me that Jamie, ***"wasn't allowed on his Xbox"*** and Sarah and Steve described removing all electronic items from the house whilst Ben was not attending school to make the home environment less appealing.

> **Steve:** ***"we had to make something nasty here [home] to make school look nice"***

> **Steve:** ***"we stripped the house, anything electrical went to the office er TV controls, everything. He had nothing"***

This strategy was perceived to have different levels of success in supporting school attendance. Whilst Donna and Steve perceived that it was successful, Sarah, Ben's mum, stated that she did not feel that it had been supportive, highlighting the individuality of perceptions between participants.

> **Sarah:** ***"Oh and the taking the stuff thing, stripping the, that doesn't work as far as I'm concerned"***

Moreover, as was the case with police involvement, Ben's description of this strategy suggested that he may have felt forced to return to school in order that he could have his electronics and games again.

> **Ben:** ***"they made me go cos they took my stuff"***

> **Ben:** ***"Because I had nothing to do but if I went back then I'd have it [stuff] all back and I'd have something to do"***

4.4.3 Sub-theme: A more individualised approach to support

Through my conversations with parents, it was identified that it was important and supportive for others to have a good understanding of parental experiences of ESNA and the family context. A lack of understanding of parental experience was linked with a less individualised and more rigid approach to 'support', in which parents described feeling misunderstood and judged by others.

> **Sarah:** ***"I think schools and the local authority can't pigeonhole people into the fact their child's not going to school, well obviously you know you're doing something wrong, you're a bad parent, it's your fault, why aren't they going to school. You know, you can't just generalise a group of people whose kids aren't going to school."***
>
> **Steve:** ***"I think sometimes people come in with like um, almost a script"***
>
> **Sarah:** ***"It was ticking boxes I think"***
>
> **Steve:** ***"Yeah, it was almost like they came with certain criteria"***

Parents suggested that they would find it supportive for their experiences and efforts to be recognised by others.

> **Sarah:** ***"I think they need to see it from the other end"*** and **"*I think the schools need to recognise as well, when people <u>are</u> trying"***

Having a better understanding of parental experience was linked to the provision of a more individualised, flexible approach to support. Parents told me that they felt that their transparency with the school about their family contexts had facilitated a more flexible and compassionate approach from others, possibly as others came to understand the individuality of YP and families.

> **Donna:** ***"I've always been <u>very</u> open, with them. Told them everything. I think that's why they've been so bloomin' lenient with me"***

Donna: ***"they've always bent over backwards for me because they know how tough it's been, at home"***

Steve: ***"we've been completely transparent with the school with David and for Ben"***

With this in mind, parents told me that that they would have preferred support which was less punitive, and which focused on the consideration of individual circumstances rather than on general assumptions.

Sarah: ***"I think schools and the council need to kind of, um not go straight down the route of, well you're gonna get a fine if you don't get your kid to school"***

This comment seems interesting in light of some of the more punitive methods parents themselves employed in an attempt to support Ben and Jamie's return to school. Here Sarah suggests that she would value the use of less punitive approaches for parents, yet parents highlighted their use of punitive approaches with their children. As suggested, the use of these parental methods may have been linked with parental feelings of uncertainty or desperation.

4.4.4 Theme summary

Having an understanding of the emotional, financial and legal impact of ESNA on parents was perceived to be helpful in facilitating more flexible and individualised approaches to supporting parents. Parents described the negative emotional impact of their children's ESNA on them, including feelings of upset, powerlessness and desperation. Parents seemed to feel trapped and unable to access support from external agencies which had led them to employ more extreme measures to ensure their children went to school, including removing enjoyable activities from the home and calling the police. Parents differed in their perceptions about whether these strategies had been successful, highlighting the individuality of perceptions about what works in relation to school attendance. Moreover, parents felt unhappy about using such strategies, and YP described feeling forced, rather than motivated, to return to school through their use. Parents described their experiences of rigid approaches to support, in which they felt that their individuality was not recognised,

and their experiences were not well understood. It was suggested that more compassionate, individualised approaches could be used, and parents highlighted that their transparency with others had facilitated the understanding and flexibility of others. It is possible that this point links with the importance of relationships for parents, as parents may have felt most able to share their experiences within well established, trusting relationships. Parental comments about their appreciation of more compassionate approaches seems particularly interesting, given their use of punitive methods with their children at home.

4.5 Theme 4: Practical support

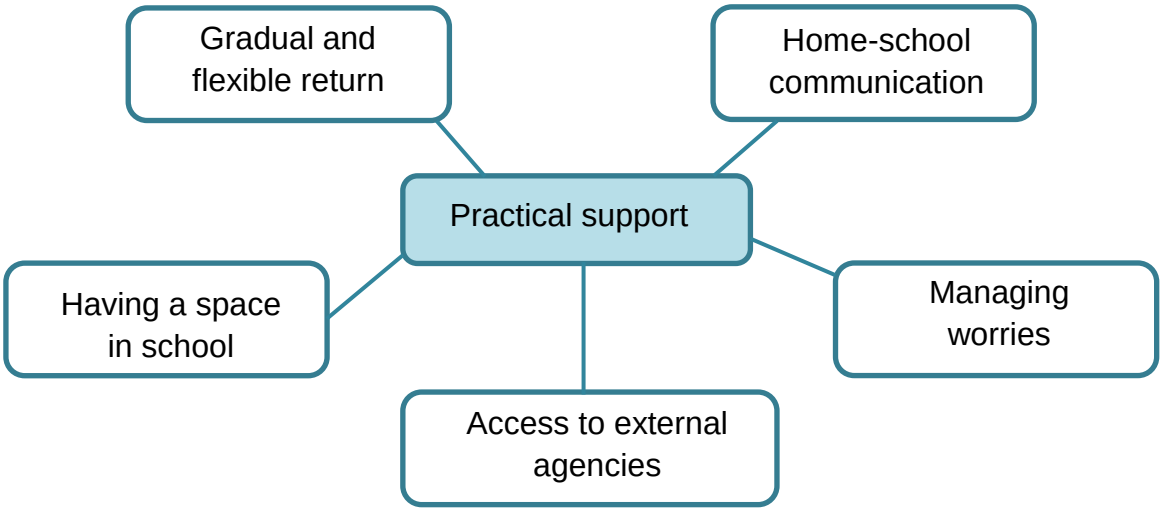

Figure 6: Theme 4: Practical support

Participants perceived that specific aspects of the practical support they received were helpful in supporting more regular school attendance of YP. This theme was divided into five sub-themes. Participants perceived that a *'gradual and flexible return', 'home-school communication'* and *'having a space in school'* were all helpful in supporting a return to school. The sub-theme *'access to external agencies'* refers to positive perceptions held by parents of the way in which school provided access to external agencies. The fifth sub-theme *'managing worries relating to the practicalities of a return'* describes how the specific worries of individual YP, in relation to practical elements of their return, might be managed effectively in the future.

4.5.1 Sub-theme: Gradual and flexible return

YP interviewed told me of the supportive nature of a gradual and flexible return to school following ESNA. When I asked Ben what he thought the most supportive aspect of his return to school had been, he told me:

> **Ben:** ***"probably a flexible return"***

During our conversation, Jamie showed me a copy of his first reduced timetable and explained that he had found it easier to initially return to lessons he preferred when he started coming back to school.

> **Jamie:** ***"Music and P.E. that's the main ones that I came in for. I felt more comfortable in those so it's just sort of easier, the reduced timetable"***

Jamie told me that he valued a gradual return to school as it had felt less overwhelming and more manageable for him.

> **Jamie:** ***"Instead of just throwing me in at the deep end and coming straight back into school it was just sort of built up."***

Donna, Jamie's mum, told me that staff who worked at 'the hub', the pastoral room at Jamie's school, had been supportive in ensuring Jamie's return was gradual and manageable, giving him control over his decisions and time to make them.

> **Donna:** ***"They're [staff] very good in there. They'll give them time and they say do you think you can manage to go to one lesson and, you know and then he'll go in"***

It is possible that giving Jamie time in this scenario highlights the way in which he was viewed individually, rather than school staff using a one size fits all approach. Another student, with different needs, may have responded well to less time in between possibly anxiety-inducing lessons, and may have appreciated adults supporting them to swiftly return to these.

Jamie also appreciated the flexibility of his current school timetable, explaining that he felt that the school had been flexible in their approach to accommodating his needs in order that he had additional time to catch up on the work he had missed.

Jamie: ***"They've [school] bent over backwards for me really. Like, I just didn't get on with P.E. GCSE so they let me drop it and now I've got an extra free period to catch up on all the work"***

When asked about a preferred future for other extended school non-attenders, Jamie suggested that others should ask for a flexible timetable from school.

Jamie: ***"shut up, get on with it, and ask for a flexible timetable"***

In line with sub-theme 4.4.3 (a more individualised approach to support), it is possible that staff understanding of Jamie's home context and experiences may have supported a more flexible approach to his return.

4.5.2 Sub-theme: Home-school communication

Parents cited regular home-school communication as helpful in supporting their child's return to school. Donna told me that school would frequently initiate contact with her whilst Jamie was experiencing periods of ESNA. However, Steve and Sarah felt they had needed to be more proactive in maintaining communication with school.

Researcher: ***"did you find you were in quite regular contact with them [school]?***

Sarah: ***"I think we had to be in contact with them, umm, I think we made more of an effort to stay in contact with them and let them know what was happening"***

Linked with home-school communication was the practicality of knowing who to contact within school. Whilst Donna named a key member of school staff with whom she liaised about Jamie's attendance, Steve and Sarah seemed to have less clarity about who they could contact about Ben's attendance. They named a number of staff who they perceived had made decisions about Ben's attendance, including the school receptionist and admissions officer, staff who may not have been best placed to make these decisions. Steve and Sarah told me that they would have preferred a single point of contact within school.

Steve: ***"Usually we would speak to the receptionist she, to a certain degree, doesn't really care she um, it's not her job"***

Sarah and Steve also highlighted that they would have preferred more timely communication from school regarding Ben's difficulties with attendance. They described that they hadn't found out about Ben's difficulties with friendships until Ben's head of year had visited them at home:

Sarah: ***"but we didn't actually find out properly about the friend thing until um, a little while into him not going to school"***

Researcher: ***"so it was kind of that communication from school, first off"***

Sarah: ***"Yeah, which would have been helpful maybe a few weeks before because apparently it had been going on for a while"***

4.5.3 Sub-theme: Having a space in school

Having a specific space to go to within school was cited as supportive by parents and YP. Participants spoke about the supportive nature of the pastoral room or 'hub' in school. It seemed important to parents and YP that YP had a specific space to go to when they arrived at school or if they were feeling overwhelmed or finding school challenging.

Donna: ***"he's [Jamie] had two wobbles I think when I had to take him into the hub, in the morning"***

Donna: ***"it's where they can go to calm down, relax [the hub]"***

Donna suggested that it was helpful for YP to have time with supportive adults at the hub.

Donna: ***"they're very good in there, they'll give them time"***

And Jamie told me that he found it useful to go to the hub to take a break from school and home.

Jamie: ***"sometimes it's just a break [the hub]"***

4.5.4 Sub-theme: Access to external agencies

School were perceived as helpful in supporting YP's return to school through referrals to external agencies. Donna told me:

> **Donna:** ***"this school especially have been excellent, they have tried anything and everything, you know, to help and to get him in"***
>
> **Researcher:** ***"what sorts of things have they tried with him?"***
>
> **Donna:** ***"Ooh, we've had family resilience, um social workers, erm.. CAMHS, um, loads"***

Donna perceived that the school and the Local Authority had been supportive and told me that she had recommended that the parent of a child who was currently experiencing difficulties with attendance move to Jamie's school.

> **Donna:** ***"the help that you do get from here is brilliant. You know I couldn't fault them [school] at all"***
>
> **Researcher:** ***"and is that the help with the hub and"***
>
> **Donna:** ***"yeah, through the hub and where they, um referred us to everything and got us, you know, everything done"***

Conversely, Steve and Sarah told me they would have valued more support to access external agencies.

> **Sarah:** ***"we were trying to call, you know, be in contact with the social workers. I felt like it was all coming from us and we weren't really getting anything back"***

Sarah told me that she felt that they, as parents, had needed to be proactive in accessing support, possibly linking with feelings that support was not readily or easily available.

Sarah: ***"he was referred to CAMHS, well actually we referred him to CAMHS um, they weren't interested"***

When asked what she would recommend for other parents in her situation, Sarah advised:

Sarah: ***"you've got to get the ball rolling yourself, don't wait for other people to get involved"***

Again, suggesting that some parents felt that they needed to take responsibility for accessing support, as it was not readily available to them.

In relation to the involvement of external agencies, it is important to remember that, as part of sub-theme 4.2.3, (taking a holistic view of the young person), Jamie described finding it difficult to engage with a more direct approach to support, suggesting that it might be important to consider the approaches taken by different external agencies and the preferences of individual YP.

4.5.5 Sub-theme: Managing worries relating to the practicalities of a return

Jamie and Ben spoke about their worries relating to the practicalities of returning to school following ESNA and the way in which these worries could be managed successfully during a return to school.

Jamie and Ben told me that they were both worried about catching up on work and managing homework when they returned, worries which were reiterated by their parents.

Jamie: ***"I missed a lot of work, I'm still catching up on it now"***

Ben: ***"since I missed some of the lessons, I didn't have to worry so much about homework and all that"***

Researcher: ***"Ah okay, is that something you were worrying about at the time?"***

Ben: ***"Yeah"***

Ben recommended that these worries could be alleviated by schools giving YP less homework on their return.

> **Ben:** ***"give them no homework so they don't have to worry about that sort of thing like for two or three weeks"***

YP also seemed to value school staff ensuring that they did not stand out when they returned to school. Both Ben and Jamie were worried about being perceived as different to their peers when they returned to school following ESNA.

> **Sarah:** ***"Ben also doesn't wanna stick out and he doesn't wanna look different to everybody else"***

Jamie seemed to value feeling as though additional attention was not drawn to him when he returned.

> **Jamie:** ***"so they [teachers] just sort of, gave me the work, let me get on with it as if I'd been there the whole time. they just sort of carried on with their lesson,"***

On returning to school following ESNA, both YP seemed to experience pressure from peers to explain their absences. Donna described this pressure in relation to Jamie's attendance.

> **Donna:** ***"when he was off a lot of the time with my cancer they'd [peers] say oh god Jamie's skiving again and that really, got him which made him worse and they'd sort of say oh what's wrong with you now?"***

Steve also told me that Ben was particularly worried about knowing what to say to his peers about his absence.

> **Steve:** ***"he was worried that then children would be sort of almost talking about him and say well where have you been?"***

Ben also told me that he wasn't sure what to say to his peers when he returned.

> **Ben:** ***"Er they asked me where I'd been"***

Researcher: ***"Yeah and what did you say?"***

Ben: ***"I either ignored them or I made something up"***

Researcher: ***"Oh really, what sorts of things did you say?"***

Ben: ***"I'd say I was ill for three months"***

Jamie explained that, in response to this questioning by his peers, he had found it helpful for school staff from the hub to talk to teachers and peers about his absence, ensuring that he did not have to explain it himself.

Jamie: ***"the hub informed them that I had been ill for quite a while"***

It's possible that Jamie's appreciation of this may link with YP finding it difficult to make sense of and articulate their experiences of ESNA (4.3.2).

4.5.6 Theme summary

In relation to practical support, participants told me that YP valued a gradual and flexible return to school alongside having a specific space to go to within school when they arrived and if they felt overwhelmed during the school day. Parents appreciated practical support offered by school, including access to external agencies and the establishment of a clear system for home-school communication. Despite this, parents presented different experiences. Some parents alluded to less clarity in terms of home-school communication and suggested that they would have appreciated a more systematic approach to this.

Participants told me about the individual worries YP had experienced which related to the practicalities of their return. These included; worries about catching up on missed work, being perceived as different to their peers and worries about what to say to peers about their absence when they returned to school. YP suggested that, to alleviate these worries, school staff could give other extended school non-attenders less homework when they returned to school, carry on as normal so that YP do not feel as though they are different, and could support YP in knowing how to communicate their absence to their peers.

4.6 Perceptions about the nature of extended school non-attendance (ESNA)

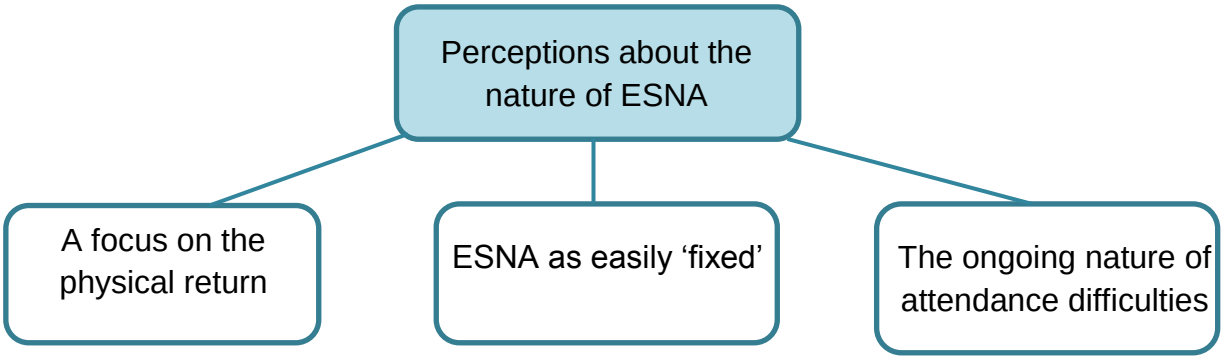

Figure 7: Theme 5: perceptions about the nature of ESNA

Throughout participant interviews, different perceptions about the nature of ESNA were identified. This theme acknowledges these perceptions with a view to reflecting on them to inform future support for extended school non-attenders and their parents. The first sub-theme, *'a focus on the physical'*, describes the way in which parents seemed to focus on physically getting YP back into school, with the perception that any issues were resolved once YP were physically back in school again. The second sub-theme, *'ESNA as easily 'fixed''*, encompasses participant perceptions that ESNA can be easily 'fixed' or 'solved'. The third sub-theme, *'the ongoing nature of difficulties'*, describes participant experiences that difficulties may be ongoing, despite YP being physically back in school, providing a nuanced contrast to the sub-theme 'a focus on the physical'. Interpretations about how these sub-themes might relate to future support for extended school non-attenders and their parents will be discussed in chapter 5.

4.6.1 Sub-theme: A focus on the physical return

When speaking about their children's attendance, parents seemed to place importance on ensuring that their child was physically in school. Donna, Steve and Sarah seemed to focus on physically taking Jamie and Ben into school and perceived success with attendance based on their child's physical presence at

school. Referring to school, Donna told me that she thought Jamie's difficulties with attendance were alleviated once she was able to get him to school in the mornings.

> **Donna:** ***"It used to be just getting him here in the morning"***

Similarly, Steve stated that he perceived success with Ben's attendance once Ben was physically back in school, linking with a focus on extreme strategies to ensure this attendance in sub-theme 4.4.2 (parental desperation and a perceived lack of support), which included police involvement.

> **Steve:** ***"if we could just sort of overcome that hurdle of not going to school and get him in, it sort of, obviously the friendship thing is still there but at least he knew what was going on in lessons"***

With this focus in mind, physically taking YP into school was perceived as a helpful approach by parents for supporting school attendance. Parents described this during their interviews.

> **Donna:** ***"I'd drive him to school rather than him getting the bus"***

> **Steve:** ***"we will take him to school"***

> **Donna:** ***"I had to drop him off and sort of like yank him into the hub"***

What happened once YP were in school, and the emotional wellbeing of YP, seemed less important than their physical presence at school. This was reflected in a comment made by Sarah in relation to what might happen once Ben had arrived at school.

> **Sarah:** ***"he can go and sit in the hub and do some homework or whatever"***

4.6.2 Sub-theme: ESNA as easily 'fixed'

Participants spoke about their perceptions of ESNA as easily 'fixed'. Jamie gave the impression that it was easy for him to come back to school once he started to attend lessons more regularly.

Jamie: ***"I just started going to lessons more and then obviously just came back to school"***

Sarah told me that a member of school staff perceived that Ben's difficulties with attendance could be easily 'fixed' by Ben not attending P.E. The member of school staff told Sarah:

Sarah: ***"if that's the only issue then, you know, we'd rather he come to school and not do P.E."***

Linked with this perception, was a sense that ESNA may have a single cause and the view that YP would be easily able to attend school again once this cause was unearthed. Steve told me that he thought school attendance could be supported once a young person was able to identify a root cause for their attendance difficulties.

Steve: ***"it's just about communication, finding out what exactly it is that each child's struggling with"***

However, it is important to note, as outlined in section 4.3.2 (making sense of experiences of ENSA), that YP in the current study had difficulty making sense of and articulating their experiences of ESNA, a factor to bear in mind in relation to Steve's suggestion.

4.6.3 Sub-theme: The ongoing nature of difficulties

Despite the focus on a young person's physical return to school and the perception that ESNA may be easily 'fixed', participants also presented a contrasting view of attendance difficulties as ongoing, suggesting the need for long-term emotional support for YP and their families.

At the time of the research, it was acknowledged that YP were still experiencing some difficulties despite their return. Steve and Sarah told me that, even though Ben

had returned to school, they felt that he may not be happy within the school environment.

> **Steve:** ***"I'm not saying that Ben goes in and sort of is crying or is upset. He'll, he just, I think he goes in and puts up with it"***

> **Sarah:** ***"the thing is, he's still not happy in school"***

Ben also told me that, despite returning to school, he was still experiencing difficulties with his friendships.

> **Ben:** ***"I still don't really have friends, but I do talk to quite a lot of people"***

Similarly, Jamie described his ongoing worries about his mum's health.

> **Jamie:** ***"It's always in my head, even if I'm at school, like my mum's my main worry"***

Parents described ongoing 'wobbles' or 'moments' in terms of attendance. Steve told me that there were times when Ben was still finding it difficult to go to school.

> **Steve:** ***"there are points when he is still not going to school"***

And Jamie told me that he had missed his first lesson on the morning of our interview, suggesting ongoing difficulties with his attendance.

4.6.4 Theme summary

The way in which participants spoke about ESNA during their interviews suggested that the nature of ESNA was perceived by participants in different ways. Both parents and YP seemed to perceive that ESNA could be easily 'fixed' or 'solved'. Parents focused on the need to understand a single cause of ESNA in order to solve the problem and they seemed to emphasise the importance of ensuring their children were physically present at school. Alongside this was the view that the physical return of YP to school was perceived as successful, with little focus on what happened next or on the emotional wellbeing of YP. This was particularly interesting considering that all participants acknowledged the ongoing nature of difficulties with

attendance, recognising that although YP may be physically back at school, they may still be experiencing difficulties with friendships, worries and feelings of unhappiness. Although the above themes do not seem to directly answer the research questions, the implications of these perceptions will be important to consider in developing future support for extended school non-attenders and their parents. These implications will be discussed in chapter 5.

4.7 Chapter summary

This chapter presented the findings of a thematic analysis of four interviews with five participants; two YP and three parents. It explored five themes identified within the data; *'the importance of relationships', 'the control, agency and voices of young people', 'understanding parental experiences of ESNA', 'practical support'* and *'perceptions about the nature of ESNA'*. Each of these themes contained sub-themes which were discussed in depth throughout the chapter, using quotes from participants to illustrate them. The findings will now be specifically considered in relation to the research questions and the literature explored in chapter 2.

5. Discussion

5.1 Introduction

Based on the discovery and dream phases of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), the current study aimed to identify what secondary-aged young people (YP), and their parents, perceived was helpful in supporting YP to return to school following extended school non-attendance (ESNA), and further aimed to explore what they would like to see implemented for others in the future. The following chapter will explore the findings of the current research in relation to the research questions and the existing literature, outlined in chapter 2.

Following this, and in light of the findings of the current research, I will then present an appreciative model of support. This model represents the process through which YP in the current study were supported to return to school and the way in which parents were supported in situations of ESNA.

Throughout this chapter, I use the term 'trusting relationships.' To provide clarity about what I mean when I use this term, I will now provide some detail about my definition of the notion of 'trust', as it relates to the current research. The notion of 'trust' can be difficult to define. A number of factors may influence feelings of trust which change over time and according to specific relationships. Despite this, in the context of the current research, the term 'trusting relationships' refers to relationships in which individuals feel a sense of respect, personal regard, competence and integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and feel as though others are predictable and dependable (Rempel, Holmes & Zanna, 1985). With this definition in mind, I will now move on to explore the findings of the current research in relation to research question 1.

5.2 Research Question 1:

What do secondary-aged young people, who have returned to school following a period of extended school non-attendance, and their parents, perceive was helpful in supporting young people to return to school?

Research Question 1 aimed to capture the 'discovery' phase of AI which focuses on strengths, successes and the 'the best of what has been' (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom,

2010, p. 7) in relation to YP's return to school following ESNA. For the purpose of the discussion, I will answer this question in two parts. Firstly, I will outline what YP perceived was helpful in supporting their return to school. Some of these perceptions were also shared by parents. Secondly, I will describe what parents perceived was supportive for them, as parents.

5.2.1 Part one: what did secondary-aged young people perceive was helpful in supporting their return to school?

5.2.1.1 Supportive relationships

Peer relationships

Being able to re-engage with supportive peer relationships at school was perceived by YP and parents to be a motivating factor in supporting a return. YP suggested that the peer relationships they valued most were those in which they felt that peers would be supportive of them in an ongoing manner. One parent said that she had felt it to be important that her son's peer group had stuck by him during periods of ESNA. Similarly, parents in Havik et al.'s (2014) study, of school factors which promoted good school attendance, viewed the friendships of their children as a protective factor against 'school refusal.'

The qualities of key adults

YP valued supportive relationships with adults, including family members, teachers and professionals. They told me that they appreciated support from individuals who they viewed as genuine, respectful, nice and honest. These findings support those of Nuttall and Woods (2013), whose participants also suggested that the personalities, knowledge, skills and experiences of professionals had been key to 'successful involvement' in cases of 'school refusal' as they had allowed for the development of trusting interpersonal relationships. In the case of the current research, the honesty of adults with YP about the consequences of their non-attendance behaviour was seen to be supportive. It is possible that this may have been dependent on the ages of YP in the current study, and the trusting relationships they had built with adults, in

which both parties felt able to discuss topics with honesty in a space built on mutual respect.

A number of other authors have outlined the importance of interpersonal relationships for supporting the school attendance of YP. Van Eck et al. (2017), for example, found that, in relation to school climate, 'chronic absence' was lower in schools in which students perceived they had good relationships with their teachers. Caseworkers in Sugrue et al.'s (2016) study proposed that trusting relationships between teachers and YP can support school attendance and Hallam and Rogers (2008) suggest that school-based relationships built on mutual respect can also encourage attendance. Parents in studies conducted by Havik et al. (2014) and Toplis (2004) also cited that relationships with emotionally supportive, respectful and trustworthy adults at school promoted feelings of safety and predictability for YP, factors which were viewed as promoting school attendance. In relation to previous research, the findings of the current study add depth, highlighting the nuanced way in which trusting interpersonal relationships may be built between YP, parents and others, and emphasising the way in which relationships can act as a foundation for positive change in a number of areas.

Recognising the impact of their ESNA

The honesty of professionals within trusting interpersonal relationships supported YP's reflection on the possible impact of their non-attendance behaviour on their family, including reflection on emotional, financial and legal implications. YP and parents told me that this was a key motivator for supporting a return to school. Aucott (2014) also reported that the attendance of a young person who participated in her study had improved through their recognition of possible legal implications for their parents and Nuttall and Woods (2013) identified that discussing the impact of not going to school with YP was linked with 'successful reintegration'. Halsey, Johnson, Kinder and Fletcher-Morgan's (2003) evaluation of the impact of prosecution on school attendance also found that the threat of parental prosecution improved student attendance and attitudes towards school. Although it could be argued that these findings stand in contrast to Zhang's (2004) suggestion that punitive methods do not improve school attendance in YP, the findings of the current research seem to add detail about the process through which YP are supported to recognise the

impact of their ESNA. In the current study, Jamie's social worker, an adult with whom he had a trusting relationship, facilitated his reflection on his behaviour and supported him to consider how things might be different, suggesting that the relationships YP have with others can underpin their motivation and influence change at different levels.

It is also important to consider that the relationships YP have with their parents may impact upon their motivations. In the current study, Jamie described being part of a close family, and it is possible that this facilitated his motivation to return to school once he had recognised the emotional impact of his non-attendance behaviour on them.

Availability of key adults

YP in the current study highlighted that key adults being available when they had perceived they needed help, had been supportive. These key adults included family members who were available to help with homework, for example. Participants in Nuttall and Woods' (2013) study of effective intervention for 'school refusal behaviour' also reported that the availability of key adults was important in both cases of reintegration. The authors suggested that YP knowing that they could access a key adult and knowing where to go during school hours to do so may have facilitated feelings of confidence and trust for YP. Similarly, Kearney and Bates (2005) recommended that the provision of a key adult at school could support a young person's return.

Others taking a holistic view of young people

Taking a holistic view of the young person and their needs, in the context of ESNA, has been cited as important by a number of studies. Parents in Malcolm et al.'s (2003) study highlighted the importance of tailoring intervention for ESNA to meet the individual needs of YP. YP in the current study told me that they appreciated being seen as a 'person' and not an 'object' during their support. This was apparent in the way in which they described being treated by adults. YP valued adults who focused on their interests, motivations and aspirations for the future, instead of purely focusing on school. One young person suggested that conversations with his social worker about the future had supported his motivation to return to school, as he was

able to consider his future in a more meaningful way. Nuttall and Woods (2013) also identified that 'taking an interest in the young person as a whole'; including YP's aspirations and interests was an important factor in 'successful intervention' for 'school refusal behaviour.' Similarly, YP in Wilkins' (2008) study, who had previously been classified as 'school refusers' but had since started attending an alternative provision regularly, cited that teachers who treated them as individuals had supported their regular attendance in a new environment. Wilkins (2008) hypothesised that the interpersonal environment of the school had instilled a sense of belonging, power and status in YP which had, in turn, supported their school attendance.

YP in the current study valued doing things with professionals, rather than just talking, and told me that they felt as though these activities had provided a break from the home environment, in which they were possibly becoming more and more isolated. YP's efforts with attendance being recognised by others was also seen as supportive by YP. Participants in Nuttall and Woods' (2013) study also reported that positive attention and encouragement from others was supportive for 'successful reintegration.'

The above findings contribute to previous research by adding depth and highlighting the nuanced way in which trusting relationships can be developed in cases of ESNA. It would seem that positive relationships can be developed through adults taking an interest in YP, using their positive qualities within relationships and taking a genuine interest in YP. Once developed, these relationships seem to act as a foundation in cases of ESNA to promote positive change and motivate YP in other areas e.g. supporting them to recognise the impact of their ESNA.

5.2.1.2 Practical support and a sense of control and agency

A gradual and flexible return to school

YP told me that a gradual and flexible return to school, over which they had felt control and agency, supported their return. YP spoke about their use of reduced timetables which gradually increased over time, as they became more comfortable being in school. They appreciated being able to choose which lessons they initially

returned to and described that this had led to them feeling less overwhelmed. Participants in Grandison's (2011) study also highlighted that a phased reintegration back to school was facilitative in their contexts and suggested that this had supported YP to feel able to cope with their return. Nuttall and Woods (2013) also found that the implementation of a flexible timetable had supported a return to school. In line with findings from the current study, participants in Nuttall and Woods' (2013) research perceived that involving YP in decision-making about their return had instilled a sense of control for them.

Having a space in school

YP appreciated a specific space they could go to in school if they felt they needed a break. At the school in which the research was conducted, this referred to the inclusion 'hub', a space in which pastoral staff could support YP. Having access to a specific space at school has been cited by Hallam and Rogers (2008) as being supportive for YP and Nuttall and Woods (2013) suggest that YP's access to a specific space can ensure YP feel safe and secure in school. Adding depth to previous research, findings from the current study suggest that YP appreciate spaces in which they can receive support from trusting adults and that, without this, access to a space in school may not be as valuable.

Managing worries relating to the practicalities of a return

In line with the findings of the current study, YP in Grandison's (2011) study also suggested that their worries being managed in relation to their return to school had facilitated their attendance. Both YP in the current study told me they had worried about practical elements of their return, including catching up on missed work, being viewed as different to their peers, and what to say to their peers about their ESNA. YP described finding it helpful that school staff were flexible in their expectations about homework and class work and managed flexible expectations in a way which had not drawn additional attention to YP at school. Parents in Havik et al.'s (2014) study also cited that teacher flexibility in the classroom in relation to the needs of their children had supported school attendance. One parent gave the example of teachers ensuring that YP did not have to talk in front of the whole class if they did not want to. In line with the worries of YP in the current study, parents in Havik et al.'s (2014) study also suggested that differentiation of learning should be developed

in agreement with YP in order that they did not feel stigmatised once they had returned to school. Nuttall and Woods (2013) also found that ensuring YP were not treated differently because of their school absence had facilitated 'successful reintegration'.

So far, in relation to Research Question 1, I have outlined the factors YP perceived were helpful in supporting their return to school. It would seem that, through the development of trusting relationships, YP were supported to; recognise the impact of their behaviour, feel a sense of control over their return and receive more individualised support which met their needs.

During interviews parents also highlighted factors they felt were helpful in supporting them, as parents, to support their child's return to school. It is suggested, by Myhill (2017), that parental support is important in cases of ESNA. Taking an ecological systems perspective of support for extended school non-attenders (Nuttall & Woods, 2013), it could be suggested, for example, that the school attendance of YP is influenced by parental self-efficacy in situations of ESNA (Myhill, 2017). I will now move on to explore what parents perceived as being supportive for them.

5.2.2 Part two: what did parents perceive was supportive for them, as parents?

During interviews, parents highlighted factors they found to be supportive. They proposed that supportive relationships with others, in which they felt listened to and understood, alongside practical aspects of support had been helpful in situations of ESNA with their children. It is possible that these factors, in turn, supported parents to feel better able to support their child's return to school.

5.2.2.1 Supportive relationships

Understanding parental experiences of ESNA

Supportive relationships with others, in which parents felt understood, were cited as helpful by parents. During interviews, parents highlighted their feelings of emotional upset, desperation, isolation, parental conflict and of feeling judged by others. Previous research has linked ESNA with parental stress and family conflict (Perrotta,

2011; Wimmer, 2010) and parental accounts outlined in the current research served to reinforce this. Parents in the studies of Gregory and Purcell (2014) and Myhill (2017) also reported feeling socially isolated, unable to cope, and judged for their child's school absence. Parents in Myhill's (2017) study, which explored parental views of their involvement during their children's ESNA, suggested that these feelings could have been alleviated by talking to other parents in similar situations. Parents interviewed for the current study felt supported through their relationships with other parents in similar situations.

A perception amongst parents that there was a lack and support had led to the use of extreme measures to ensure their child's school attendance. There was a sense that parents were desperate, and that YP had been 'forced' back to school against their will. Some parents perceived these techniques to be useful for ensuring their children attended school. However, the effectiveness of these techniques was questioned by other parents and parents admitted feeling unhappy about their use of extreme measures, such as calling the police and removing electronic items from the house. Moreover, although parents had used these more punitive methods with their children at home, they told me that they themselves did not value the punitive methods used by local authorities with parents.

Professionals who were perceived as genuine, who listened and who attempted to understand parental perspectives were viewed as supportive by parents in the current study. Adding depth to previous findings, the specific positive aspects of these relationships seemed to facilitate parents feeling that their difficult experiences of ESNA had been understood and had allowed for a more flexible and compassionate approach for support to be adopted by professionals and staff. Similarly, parents in Aucott's (2014) study reported that their relationships with family support workers, who understood the difficulties they faced, acted as good sources of practical and emotional support. Nuttall and Woods (2013) also highlight the importance of listening to parents and providing them with encouragement, especially given the complexity of needs within individual families. Atkinson, Halsey, Wilkin and Kinder (2000) suggest that the school attendance of YP can be supported through listening to the voices of parents and tailoring intervention according to their needs.

Parents in the current study suggested that their transparency with school had facilitated school's understanding of their experiences and their family contexts, leading to the adoption of a more flexible and individualised approach. These findings, and those relating to the punitive methods employed by parents at home, may link with Ross' (1977) fundamental attribution error, which suggests that individuals tend to attribute the behaviour of others to perceived internal characteristics rather than situational factors. In line with this, Malcolm et al. (2003) found that YP and parents tended to report school-based explanations of ESNA whereas school staff and other professionals generally explained ESNA through individual child and family characteristics. In the case of the current research, it is possible that parents felt more supported once the school had a better understanding of parental experience and family context, as school staff were able to attribute the behaviour of YP to situational factors and consider support which met the needs of YP and families.

In relation to parental transparency, it is also important to note that parental openness may have been facilitated through the trusting relationships parents had already developed with school staff, highlighting that these relationships may underpin processes of support for parents and YP and may be complex in nature. Sugrue et al. (2016), for example, suggest that supportive relationships between families and schools can facilitate good communication. It is possible, in different circumstances, that parents might feel less able to share their experiences with others, which has implications for the ways in which relationships between parents, schools and professionals might be best facilitated.

5.2.2.2 Practical support

Home-school communication

Underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), Lyon and Cotler (2009) propose that connections between the school and home environments can impact upon YP's attendance. Collaborative working between home and school was cited as supportive by school staff in Grandison's (2011) study, and professionals in Nuttall and Woods' (2013) study suggested that regular communication between home and school was helpful in supporting 'successful reintegration.' In the current study, regular communication between home and school was seen as supportive by

parents in helping them to support their child's attendance, echoing the findings of Wallace (2017). Practical elements of this contact included; knowing whether school or home would call first and being in touch with a named person at school who was in an appropriate position to make decisions. Dalziel and Henthorne (2005) and Epstein and Sheldon (2002) also found that the school attendance of YP was positively affected when parents were provided with a designated contact in school to talk to about their worries or concerns. Parents in Aucott's study (2014) also cited the supportive nature of having a named member of school staff who was easily accessible.

Access to external agencies

Parents in the current study also valued school providing access to external agencies, which they perceived to be helpful in supporting their child's return to school. 'The hub' at the school in which the current research was conducted, was cited as an important resource for this access. This finding is supported by Nuttall and Woods (2013) who found that the availability of professionals was supportive in meeting the needs of parents whose child was returning to school following 'school refusal behaviour.' Having answered Research Question 1 in two parts, I will now move on to answer Research Question 2.

5.3 Research Question 2:

What do these secondary-aged young people, and their parents, perceive to be desirable support for extended school non-attenders and their parents, and what would they like to see implemented in the future?

In this section I will explore data in relation to Research Question 2, which aimed to capture the 'dream' phase of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). This research question therefore focuses on aspirational thinking about an ideal future in relation to support for extended school non-attenders and their parents. As with Research Question 1, information in this section will also be presented in two parts. The first section will focus on what YP perceived to be desirable support for extended school non-attenders. Again, some of their views were reiterated by parents. The second section will focus on what parents suggested would be supportive for other parents.

Following this section, I will present an appreciative model of support for YP and their parents, discuss the possible implications of my findings and suggest directions for future research.

5.3.1 Part one: what do secondary-aged young people perceive to be desirable support for extended school non-attenders and what would they like to see implemented in the future?

5.3.1.1 Supportive relationships

More supportive peer relationships

YP told me that, although they were motivated to return to school due to the supportive peer relationships experienced there, peers tended to be in contact less during periods of ESNA, adding to feelings of social isolation and abandonment for YP. YP suggested that more regular contact during ESNA would be supportive, and one young person suggested that he would have found it supportive for his peers to have been friendlier with him when he had returned to school. Reid (2003a, 2003b) suggests that intervention which addresses the social needs of YP can be supportive in cases of ESNA. In line with the above, Kearney and Bates (2005) suggest that the provision of a peer buddy during YP's return to school could be supportive and Nuttall and Woods (2013) found that supporting YP to develop their social relationships at school was perceived to be important for 'successful reintegration'. They suggest that these relationships give YP something to look forward to at school and propose that relationships can be facilitated by identifying common interests between YP and their peers. Supporting this finding, Hallam and Rogers (2008) also found that group work which focused on building relationships improved the school attendance of a group of YP, suggesting that peer relationships at school are important and can be targeted to further support YP's attendance.

Availability of others

As outlined in section 5.2.1.1, YP highlighted that they valued that others were available when they perceived they needed support. Jamie recommended that key adults could be even more readily available for YP during ESNA and a return to

school. Linked with section 5.2.1.1, it is possible that this availability might facilitate the development of trusting relationships.

5.3.1.2 Support to make sense of experiences with ESNA

Atkinson et al. (2000) suggest that the school attendance of YP can be supported through listening to their voices and tailoring intervention according to their needs. In the current study, Jamie articulated that he had not felt listened to by professionals and YP told me that they would have valued the opportunity for others to listen to their perspectives about ESNA and a return to school. Similarly, participants in Nuttall and Woods' (2013) study highlighted the importance of ensuring that YP were listened to and given the opportunity to express their views. They hypothesised that this may have supported YP to feel more independently in control of their experiences. Kearney and Bensaheb (2006) suggested that intervention for ESNA should be linked with its perceived causality. However, YP in the current study told me that they found it difficult to identify underlying reasons for their behaviours and had difficulty explaining their behaviours to others, suggesting a more complex experience of ESNA than is presented in the literature, and highlighting the realities of working with groups of adolescent YP. The findings of Beckles (2014) and Nuttall and Woods (2013) also suggest that YP may have difficulty making sense of their experiences, making it difficult to target intervention. It may be that YP would benefit from support to make sense of their experiences within a trusting relationship with an adult, as YP's willingness to share their voices may be dependent on their relationships and their motivation to do so.

5.3.1.3 Practical support

Gradual and flexible return

Jamie recommended that other extended school non-attenders should ask for a flexible timetable to support their return to school. It is possible that this would depend on a young person's feelings of agency in situations of non-attendance and their school context i.e. whether or not a school has created an environment in which

a young person feels a sense of control and feels able to articulate their voice and ask for a flexible timetable.

Managing worries relating to the practicalities of a return

YP suggested that it would be helpful for teachers to support the individual worries of YP in relation to the practical aspects of returning to school. For YP involved in the current study, these worries included; catching up on missed work, telling peers about their absence and being seen as different. Ben recommended that teachers could give YP less homework when they returned to school, indicating a desire for a more flexible approach to curriculum delivery for extended school non-attenders. In line with this recommendation, Kearney and Bates (2005) suggest that temporary easing of homework may be helpful in reducing school 'absenteeism.'

So far, in relation to Research Question 2, I have outlined what YP perceived as desirable support for others returning to school following ESNA. YP suggested that their social relationships could be further supported, that time and space should be available for them to make sense of their experiences and share their voices, and that further support could be implemented relating to the practical aspects of their return. I will now move on to outline what parents in the current study perceived as desirable support for other parents of extended school non-attenders.

5.3.2 Part two: what do parents perceive to be desirable support for parents of extended school non-attenders and what would they like to see implemented in the future?

5.3.2.1 Supportive relationships with other parents

Elsherbiny (2017) suggests that improved social support for parents is linked with increased school attendance in children. Parents in the current study suggested that further opportunities to develop relationships with other parents, in similar situations, would be supportive for them. They proposed that this would provide emotional and practical support and may ensure parents feel less socially isolated and better understood by others. It is possible that these supportive relationships would help parents to better support their children in situations of ESNA. Dalziel and Henthorne

(2005), for example, suggest that ESNA may be linked with parental capacity to address the behaviour of their children and propose that parents who are feeling more skilled and confident to address behaviour may be able to better support their children's attendance. Moreover, Myhill's (2017) findings suggest that parental confidence and self-efficacy is important for helping parents to manage ESNA. Parents suggested that schools might be able to facilitate opportunities for parents to meet on a regular basis.

5.3.2.2 Further understanding of parental experiences

It was suggested, by parents, that others having an even better understanding of their experiences with ESNA would facilitate the adoption of more individualised approaches to support. Given that parents had felt judged by others in relation to their child's attendance, they suggested that professionals should be open minded when meeting parents of extended school non-attenders and be wary of making assumptions about situations. Parents in Myhill's (2017) study reported that they had felt better able to engage with school staff and manage their child's ESNA when they had been listened to, felt understood, and involved in decision-making processes. Wallace (2017) also found that parents of 'chronic absentees' identified that a more compassionate approach would help them to support their children's school attendance.

Parents in the current study told me that they had experienced universal support which, they felt, had been based on generic criteria, and not on their individual needs. They suggested that they would have preferred a more individualised, compassionate approach to support in which their needs were understood. Parents also suggested the need for a less punitive system, which they perceived to be unfair, explaining to me that they were not deliberately keeping their children from attending school. Similarly, practitioners interviewed as part of Nuttall and Woods' (2013) study highlighted that they did not feel that parental prosecution had been helpful in supporting 'successful reintegration.'

5.3.2.3 Practical support

Access to external agencies

In spite of support from school to access external agencies, some parents told me that they wished external agencies had been more easily accessible to them. Sarah and Steve told me that they had found it difficult to access support from external agencies because Ben's behaviour was not 'extreme enough' to warrant support and he was 'just a non-attender'. Moreover, they suggested that parents should 'get the ball rolling' themselves as they perceived a lack of support from others, suggesting that they would have valued further support. Myhill (2017) also found that parents had found it difficult to access the right support for their children and parents in her study further described being passed between different external agencies.

Home-school communication

Some parents suggested that more timely and regular communication from schools would be beneficial for other parents in the future, suggesting that schools could be in contact with parents as soon as they notice a change in the young person's behaviour or notice any difficulties. These parental recommendations align with Pellegrini's (2007) promotion of early identification for ESNA and The Department for Education's (DfE, 2016) recommendation that early action is crucial to ensure that schools and local authorities address patterns of absence (DfE, 2016; The Education Act, 1996). These suggestions are supported by findings from Nuttall and Woods (2013) whose participants proposed that the early identification of YP's needs was related to 'successful reintegration' following 'school refusal behaviour.' It is important to note that being able to identify needs at an early stage would depend on knowing YP well in school, suggesting the importance of good relationships between school staff and YP.

Parents also suggested that it was preferable for a clear system of communication to be set up between home and school, in line with the findings of Toplis (2004), whose participants suggested that there should be more clarity in terms of communication with professionals in cases of 'emotionally based school refusal.'

5.4 Additional findings relating to perceptions of the nature of ESNA

A fifth theme, 'perceptions about the nature of ESNA' was presented in chapter 4. Whilst this theme did not directly answer the research questions, it explored some important perceptions about the nature of ESNA identified from data analysis. These perceptions included; a focus on YP's physical return to school, the view that ESNA could be easily 'fixed' and perceptions relating to the on-going nature of difficulties. These findings will now be presented with a view to reflecting on the implications of them in section 5.6.

5.4.1 Extended school non-attendance as easily 'fixed'

Participants spoke about the general perception that ESNA could be easily 'fixed'. It was suggested, for example, that Ben did not have to attend P.E. if it was the 'only issue' he had with school. Linked with this perception was a sense that ESNA may have a single cause, and that YP would be easily able to attend school once this had been 'unearthed' through conversations with them. However, given the findings outlined in section 5.3.1.2, which suggest that YP may have difficulty making sense of their experiences, it would seem that this 'unearthing', is likely to be complex. Moreover, Thambirijah et al. (2008) suggest that the multi-faceted and dynamic nature of ESNA makes it unlikely that a single 'reason' for non-attendance will be identified.

5.4.2 A focus on the physical return

Parents in the current study seemed to focus on ensuring their child was physically present in school, supporting the findings of Nuttall and Woods (2013) and Myhill (2017). This physical presence in school was often seen as a sign of a 'successful' return to school, with little focus seemingly given to what happened once YP were back at school or on their feelings of emotional wellbeing.

5.4.3 The on-going nature of difficulties

I was particularly surprised by a focus on the physical return to school given participant perceptions about the on-going nature of difficulties once YP had returned to school. Parents told me that they believed that YP were still unhappy at school, despite now attending more regularly. They described 'wobbles' or 'moments' during

which YP still found it difficult to attend. Similarly, adults in Grandison's (2011) study described 'hiccups' and 'blips' with the school attendance of YP. YP in the current study also told me about their on-going difficulties, despite their physical return. These included on-going difficulties with making and sustaining friendships and worries about parental health. YP in Grandison's (2011) research reported difficulties with their emotions and behaviours 18 months after school reintegration, suggesting the need to maintain, monitor and review intervention and support over time (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

5.5 Appreciative model: Factors which may support young people to return to school following a period of ESNA

In light of the findings from the current study, an appreciative model has been developed. This model outlines factors which may support YP to return to school following a period of ESNA. To reflect the research findings, the model aims to illustrate the way in which trusting relationships might be fostered between YP, parents and others and how these relationships might support more individualised and flexible approaches to support which may, in turn, support YP to return to school and may support parents in situations of ESNA. The model hopes to build upon the ecological model of successful reintegration developed by Nuttall and Woods (2013). It is hoped that the model might be used by Educational Psychologists and other professionals, alongside national, local and school-based policies and evidence-based practices, to consider how YP and parents might be supported in situations of ESNA.

Before presenting the model, it is essential to note that experiences of ESNA and support are heterogeneous in nature. The model presented below is situated in the unique contexts of the individuals who participated in the study and is not intended to be directly applicable or generalisable across situations of ESNA. The factors outlined within the current model are not exhaustive and other supportive factors are likely to exist outside of the context of this research. As outlined in section 3.12.1, the current study aimed to facilitate an understanding of what YP and parents might find helpful in supporting YP's return to school.

It is also important to consider that the appreciative model is based on the first two phases of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), through which I hoped to identify the 'best of what was' (discovery phase) and support participants to envision 'what might be' (dream phase). The model represents both the discovery and dream phases of AI, outlining what participants appreciated from their experiences and what they would envisage in terms of future support for themselves and others.

The model is arranged into two sections. The first section provides detail about how trusting relationships were developed between YP, parents and others in the current study. Findings suggest that these relationships facilitated an understanding of the needs of YP and parents, as participants in the current study felt well understood, more able to be open with others and felt a greater sense of control in their situations. Through this, findings from the current study suggest that a more individualised and flexible approach to support was developed. The second section of the model therefore represents this approach and the factors which supported it in practice. At the bottom of the model, the phrase 'ongoing monitoring of the emotional wellbeing of YP and parents to ensure their needs continue to be met over time' features. This phrase, underlying the model, aims to illustrate that, within the current study, participants suggested that the emotional wellbeing of YP and parents should be considering on an on-going basis, challenging previous notions of 'success' in cases of ESNA.

Adding a unique contribution to current research in the context of ESNA, the appreciative model aims to add insight into the ways in which trusting interpersonal relationships were developed with YP and parents in the current study and how these facilitated positive change, as the needs of YP and parents were better understood and supported.

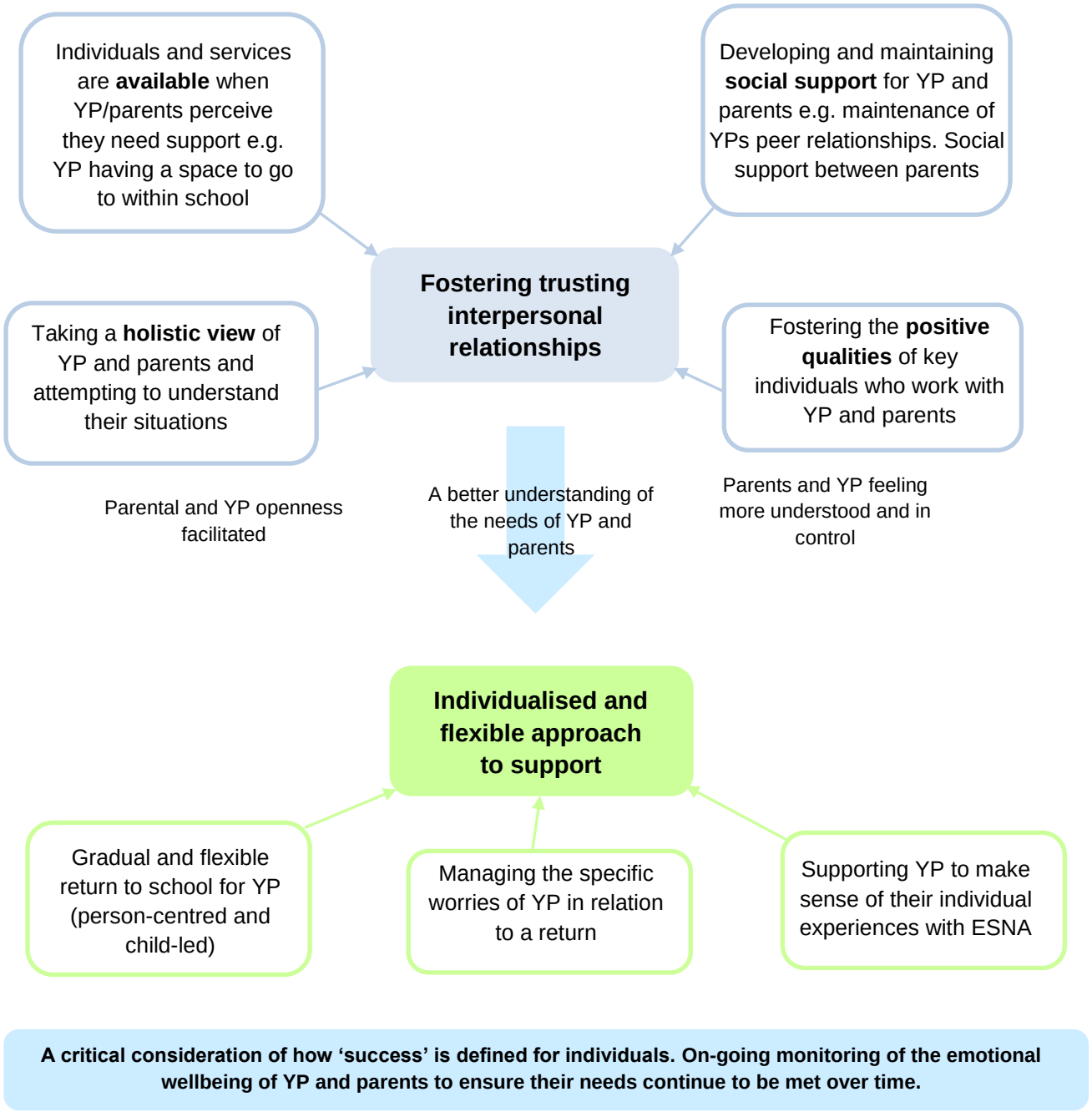

Figure 8: Appreciative model

5.6 Viewing findings through the lens of neurological factors influencing adolescents

Although neurological factors relating to adolescent behaviour did not emerge as an influencing factor for ESNA during the systematic literature search for the current study, it seems important to consider these factors in relation to findings, given that participants were two adolescent boys and their parents. This section will therefore provide a brief overview of some of the neurological factors influencing adolescents and the way in which these could provide an explanatory framework for some of the study's findings. I am aware that the literature in this area is extensive and therefore have chosen to focus on factors which seemed, to me, to be the most pertinent in relation to the current study and its findings.

Adolescence has been identified as a critical period for brain development (Griffin, 2017), during which areas of the brain which deal with executive functioning i.e. the ability make decisions, problem-solve, control impulsivity and regulate emotions, and social cognition, the ability to process and problem-solve with social information, are strengthened (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). It is thought, however, that these brain areas, which include the prefrontal cortex, hippocampus and amygdala, and the connections between them, may not fully develop in YP until their mid-twenties (Griffin, 2017) meaning that adolescents develop their skills slowly throughout their teenage years (Defoe et al., 2015).

Prefrontal cortex development in adolescence has been linked with the ability to begin regulating emotions and inhibiting impulsive responses to situations. Baird et al. (1999) found that adolescents have greater difficulty controlling their emotions and may show impulsive emotional responses, especially in an attempt to alleviate distress. In the context of ESNA, it could be that adolescents find it difficult to regulate their emotional responses and impulsive behaviour when feeling distressed at the prospect of attending school or leaving home. Sarah and Steve's specific descriptions of their son, Ben's, behaviour in the current study suggests that Ben may have found it difficult to regulate his emotions and behaviour during ESNA.

Changes in the adolescent prefrontal cortex have also been associated with increased self-awareness in YP (Oschner, 2004) and an increasing focus on

relationships with peers. YP may become more aware of how they are perceived by others during adolescence (Somerville, 2013) and may be especially sensitive to social rejection by peers (Moor et al., 2012), providing one possible explanation of the important role of peer relationships in a return to school for extended school non-attenders. In line with these findings, YP in the current research told me that they were worried about how they would be perceived by their peers when they returned to school and appreciated support which alleviated some of these concerns. Jamie, one of the YP in the current study, also suggested that his peer relationships were of high importance to him and Ben, the other young person, told me that his lack of social inclusion was making school attendance difficult for him.

The risk-taking behaviour of YP has also been linked to changes in neurotransmitter systems in the brain during adolescence i.e. the dopamine system. It is thought that adolescents may process rewards differently to adults, and become more driven by the perceived rewards of their behaviour than associated risks (Steinberg, 2004). In the context of ESNA, this could suggest that YP in the current study perceived that the rewards of remaining at home during the school day outweighed the less important risks associated with missing school. Frith and Frith (2003) propose that YP may also still be developing the ability to take the perspectives of others during adolescence. In the current study, one of the young people, Jamie, explained that he was supported to consider the impact of his behaviour on his family through his relationship with a trusted adult, and that this acted as a key motivator for his return to school. It is possible that, in situations of ESNA, adolescents may not readily recognise the consequences of their behaviour for others and could be supported to do so (Aucott, 2014; Nuttall & Woods, 2013).

YP in the current study also seemed to have difficulty making sense of their experiences of ESNA. Jamie, for example, told me that he didn't know why he wasn't attending school. In the context of neurological factors which may have been impacting upon Jamie and Ben's experiences, it does not seem surprising that they may have had difficulty making sense of their behaviour. Jamie and Ben may have had to manage a number of demands and stressors in their environment, during a time when their internal emotional states and ability to make decisions was changing and their skills to support themselves had not yet developed.

It is important to note that the above explanations should be viewed in conjunction with other frameworks employed by the current study e.g. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework and have been touched upon to provide some neurological context for the current findings. Lopez et al. (2008) highlights that there are individual differences in cognitive, social and emotional development in adolescents and that YP should therefore be viewed within their individual contexts.

Griffin (2017) proposes that adolescence is a key opportunity for new skills to be developed, supported and refined. She suggests that it may be helpful to give YP space and adult support to help them understand and manage challenging situations through discussion of their thoughts, feelings and actions and the way in which adolescent development might impact upon these. Through this, she suggests, a greater sense of mastery and control could be encouraged in YP. In a similar way, the model proposed by the current research suggests that YP could be supported by adults to make sense of their experiences with ESNA in order that they feel better understood and more in control. Griffin (2017) also suggests that research which focuses on what YP find helpful in specific situations is important to establish how YP would prefer to talk about situations and be supported through them.

Highlighting the neurological factors influencing adolescents may also be useful for parents and adults who work with YP experiencing ESNA and a return to school. The provision of training to these groups may be helpful in supporting the adults around YP to consider different factors impacting upon their behaviour.

Having touched upon some of the neurological factors influencing adolescents and possible implications of these for the findings of the current study, I will now move on to discuss wider implications of the findings.

5.7 Implications

The findings of the current study may have some implications for schools and professionals working with YP who experience ESNA and their parents. Throughout this section I will discuss some of these implications, also highlighting possible implications for the practice of Educational Psychologists (EPs).

I will explore the implications of the study under the following headings;

- The importance of supportive relationships
- Collaborative working
- Extended school non-attenders as an overlooked group
- The importance of on-going support
- How is ‘success’ defined in cases of ESNA?

5.7.1 The importance of supportive relationships

Findings from the current study imply that YP experiencing difficulties with school attendance should be supported to develop trusting interpersonal relationships with adults, including school staff and appropriate professionals. The current study adds insight into the way in which these relationships could be developed, suggesting that adults should take an interest in the YP, including their motivations and aspirations and take time to engage in constructive activities together, to promote a sense that the young person is valued, respected and emotionally supported. Adults should be readily available when YP perceive they need support. At school this might mean that a young person knows where to find a key adult during the school day. The current findings imply that these key relationships may act as a foundation to facilitate change in different areas, supporting YP to;

- make sense of their experiences with non-attendance and voice their views
- recognise the impact of their ESNA for themselves and those around them
- consider their future in a more meaningful way

The peer relationships of YP could also be supported to facilitate a return to school. Findings from the current study suggest that extended school non-attenders and their peers should be encouraged to stay in touch whilst YP are absent from school if peers and YP feel that they would like to do so. This may promote a sense of belonging for extended school non-attenders. Schools could develop systems to support this and peers could be further helped to understand ESNA. The management of peer relationships as the young person returns to school also seem to be important. Findings from the current study suggest that it might be helpful for

school staff to initially scaffold peer interactions, including supporting extended school non-attenders to develop scripts about their absence and through supporting peers to understand how a young person can be best supported during their return. This may be facilitated by ensuring adults around the young person work in collaboration with them and develop trusting relationships in order to elicit their views. As they return to school, YP's social relationships could be supported and monitored depending on their needs.

With these findings in mind, it may be beneficial for schools to take a systemic approach to supporting YP, creating community environments in which positive trusting relationships are developed between YP and staff. Fallon (2013) suggests that EPs have an important role to play in facilitating community relationships. Using their skills in rapport-building and knowledge of Rogerian principles which underpin helping relationships (Rogers, 1958), EPs may be able to support the development of trusting relationships between YP and others within school and community contexts to develop environments in which YP feel a sense of belonging and agency. EPs are also well placed to deliver staff training about ESNA in schools to develop staff and student understanding, and support schools to consider how they might support YP through school systems.

The research literature focuses on the importance of locating causality (Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006) to inform intervention. However, findings from the current research suggest that YP may have difficulty identifying causality in relation to their ESNA and highlight that YP may require support to reflect on their experiences. Nuttall and Woods (2013) suggest that techniques such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Motivational Interviewing may be supportive in this process of reflection and EPs may be well placed to deliver this with YP or support other adults to do so. EPs may also be well placed to consider the complex system around the child (Webster et al., 2003), using their psychological knowledge and their knowledge of systems to hypothesise about causality and support schools to target and review intervention.

In contexts of ESNA, it seems important to consider YP's motivation to engage in developing relationships with others. It is recognised, in the current study, that YP may have been motivated to engage with adults and peers. However, this may not always be the case in situations of ESNA. YP may require support to develop their

motivation over time through use of techniques such as Motivational Interviewing (MI) (Rollnick & Miller, 1995). Atkinson and Woods' (2003) use of MI with a 'disaffected' secondary school student suggests that MI may support YP's reflection on their motivation, their attendance and the development of positive self-concepts over time.

Evidence from the current study also implies that parents of extended school non-attenders would benefit from developing trusting interpersonal relationships with others, in order to feel more emotionally supported, and in helping them to support their child's return to school. Parents should be given opportunities to meet with other parents in similar situations to support their emotional wellbeing and alleviate feelings of social isolation. This could be facilitated on a school or Local Authority level. It seems important that those working with the parents of extended school non-attenders recognise the challenging and, often complex, situations parents are managing and the possible negative emotional impact of their experiences. Developing trusting relationships with parents, in which parents feel able to share their experiences, may support others to adopt more flexible, individualised approaches to support which acknowledge the needs of families.

5.7.2 Collaborative Working

Evidence from the current study suggests that the individual needs of YP and their families should be at the centre of support, and that schools and professionals should aim to work in collaboration with YP and parents. Collaborative work with YP may include; giving them control over managing the practicalities of their return, including the lessons they attend, ensuring they have access to a safe space in school and ensuring their worries are listened to and acted upon to promote a sense of wellbeing e.g. flexibility around homework and ensuring YP do not feel stigmatised at school. As professionals who are skilled in identifying the needs of YP and eliciting their voices, EPs have an important role in supporting collaborative working between individuals (Miller & Frederickson, 2006) and may be able to use their skills in consultation to facilitate collaborative change (Busse & Beaver, 2000).

In addition, systems for home-school communication and collaborative working could be established between parents and schools at the earliest opportunity. This may support professionals to develop their understanding of parental contexts and experiences and may lead to parents feeling better listened to and understood. A foundation of trusting interpersonal relationships between parents, school staff and professionals may facilitate information sharing and communication and it may be important for schools to consider the ways in which parents might be best engaged.

It is important to note that the motivation of YP and parents to engage in collaborative work may depend on their relationships with school staff and professionals. Although, within the current research, participants spoke openly about their experiences; this may not always be the case. EPs are well placed to facilitate relationships and create collaborative spaces in which individuals can problem solve together. Hart's Ladder of participation (1992) may be a helpful tool to use in supporting schools to identify how collaborative their work with YP and parents is. Hart (1992) uses the model of an eight-step ladder to understand the way in which YP are involved in decision-making processes. The ladder ranges from manipulation, decoration and tokenism at the bottom, non-participatory end, to child-initiated, shared decision making at the top, participatory end.

5.7.3 Extended school non-attenders as an overlooked group

The current research highlighted differing experiences of access to external agencies. Whilst one parent described being easily able to access support from CAMHS and other professionals, other parents suggested that they had been unable to access support without specific or extreme behaviours. This experience may have implications for the way in which ESNA is conceptualised and the way in which families are able to access support.

It is possible that the difficulties faced by extended school non-attenders may be overlooked, especially if YP do not display extreme or externalising behaviours. YP also tend to remain at home during ESNA and it could be suggested that their difficulties may therefore be viewed by others as requiring less urgent support

because they are not presenting as immediately unmanageable or problematic within school environments.

Findings suggest that, in the absence of exhibiting specific behaviours which fall under clinical or behavioural categories, YP may be left unsupported by professionals. Sheppard (2011), for example, suggests that YP who seem to 'self-exclude' through ESNA are offered little support from Local Authorities, in comparison to those who are excluded by others based on their behavioural difficulties. This lack of support may be linked with changes in Local Authority systems in response to austerity measures instigated by the government. This context may have placed further pressure on schools to provide support for extended school non-attenders, in the absence of having the resource to do so, resulting in the adoption of more punitive approaches. Findings of the current study suggest that those who work with YP and their parents in situations of ESNA may find it helpful to reflect on the way in which extended school non-attenders and parents are supported through current systems. Parents and YP in the current study appreciated the adoption of a more compassionate, flexible and individualised approach over time. It is possible that others in similar situations may too appreciate this approach. It is important to note, however, that the adoption of such an approach may be constrained by the more universal systems currently employed by some Local Authorities and schools. Having said this, EPs may have an important role to play in challenging commonly held perceptions in relation to ESNA. Cameron (2006) proposes that EPs should act as key agents of change, suggesting that they may be able to use their skills and knowledge to promote positive change for YP and parents in situations of ESNA.

5.7.4 The importance of on-going support

There seems to be no 'quick fix' in terms of supporting YP to return to school following ESNA. As suggested by a number of authors, explanations and experiences of ESNA, and a return to school, may be multi-faceted, complex, dynamic and heterogeneous in nature (Pellegrini, 2007; Malcolm et al., 2003; Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Lyon & Cotler, 2009). This suggests that involvement in cases of ESNA may require a multi-faceted approach over time and YP may require on-going

support, even once they have returned to school. Both YP in the current study cited their on-going worries, despite a return to school, suggesting that support should be maintained and monitored over time.

5.7.5 How is 'success' defined in cases of ESNA?

Fremont (2003) suggests that intervention in cases of 'school refusal' should aim to initiate a return to school and re-establish regular school attendance. However, How (2015) warns that, in the context of intervention for ESNA, the notion of 'success' should be considered critically. The current research, and the research of others, has defined success in cases of ESNA as the young person's return to school. The current research, for example, focused on an improvement in the young person's attendance and the research of Nuttall and Woods (2013) focused on 'success' in terms of adult-led reports about reductions in the young person's anxiety and an increase in their attendance at school. It is possible that a rapid return to school is viewed as successful due to the pressures experienced by schools, Local Authorities and professionals to improve attendance as quickly as possible. These conceptualisations of success do not seem to take YP's perceptions of success into account and seem to focus solely upon a young person's physical return to school. Findings of the current study imply that, alongside a physical return to school, YP's emotional wellbeing should also be considered in definitions of 'success' for ESNA. I was surprised that Jamie and Ben both reported feelings of worry and unhappiness despite their return to school suggesting that, although their return was 'successful' in relation to the criteria of the current study, my notion of success was limited, and had not considered their emotional wellbeing. Evidence from the current study suggests that the way in which 'success' in cases of ESNA is conceptualised in the literature and in practice should be broadened to encompass the on-going emotional wellbeing of YP and their voices in relation to what constitutes success.

5.8 Strengths and Limitations

The current research offered unique insights into the perceptions of two YP and their parents in relation to support for ESNA, which I consider to be a strength of the

study. Furthermore, I took a systematic approach to the process of the research, from selecting literature for the review, to recruitment and data analysis. The strengths of the research in relation to these areas have been discussed in sections 2.2, 3.9.1, 3.9.2 and 3.11.1 and will be further discussed in section 6.3.

In addition to the limitations of using AI as a methodology for the current research (outlined in section 3.7.3) and the limitations present during the processes of recruitment and data collection (sections 3.9.3 and 3.10.3), a number of further limitations of the current study were identified.

The research took place in one mainstream secondary school in one Local Authority in the south of the UK. Difficulties with recruiting participants meant that the sample size for the current study was smaller than anticipated and participants were recruited via one educational setting. It is important to note that the findings of the current study cannot therefore be generalised across populations. However, this was not the intention of the current research, which hoped to highlight some of the ways in which extended school non-attenders and their parents might be supported. The use of thematic analysis with such a small sample size could also limit the findings of the study, as it could be argued that a minimum number of participants should exist in relation to the generation of each theme. However, as outlined in section 3.11.2, a focus on sample size rather than the salience of themes for participants, may fail to acknowledge the complexity and nuance of individual experience.

My approach to the recruitment process may have limited the sample size for the current research and, in hindsight, I could have approached the process differently in an attempt to maximise participant numbers. A reflection on how I could have approached this process differently is outlined in section 6.4.2.

It is important to consider the possible role of gender in the current research. Both YP who participated in the study were young men. As a female researcher interviewing male participants, I wondered how perceptions of gender may have influenced the information shared and gathered, and the way in which data was analysed. One parent in the current study, for example, seemed to focus on his son's physicality and on the importance of physically controlling his son's return to school. I wondered if this would have been different had he been speaking about experiences with a daughter. It is interesting to note that two young women who were invited to

participate in the study felt unable to do so, suggesting that there may be differences in the way in which young males and females experience processes of school non-attendance and re-attendance.

The views of school staff and other professionals who were involved with YP and their parents were not included in the current study. The incorporation of these views may have added further insight into the factors these individuals perceived as being supportive. Parents in the current study highlighted processes through which they felt their children were supported to return to school. In a similar way, professionals and school staff may have provided insight into the processes used by them to support YP and parents. Having said this, the research aimed to offer a unique insight into the experiences of individual YP and their parents involved in the study in relation to support for ESNA, as these groups were deemed to be those most affected.

Aspects of subjectivity should also be acknowledged in terms of limitations of the research. It should be noted, for example, that the seven factors outlined in section 2.7 ‘factors associated with ESNA’ which include factors under the subheadings; within-child, family, school and community, school climate, learning environment, interpersonal relationships and a dynamic approach, should not be viewed as a fully comprehensive list of factors associated with ESNA. Rather, these seven subheadings were selected because they seemed most pertinent for me, as a subjective researcher who was engaging with the literature. It must be emphasised that these seven factors should not be considered as a stand-alone fully comprehensive list exclusive of other influencing factors.

A further limitation which relates to subjectivity must also be noted. As part of the recruitment process, Educational Psychologists (EPs) were asked to provide me with the names of schools who they perceived had ‘good pastoral support.’ It is important to note that the notion of ‘good pastoral support’ is subjective and was not discussed with EPs during the recruitment phase of the study. It is therefore possible that EPs used differing conceptualisations of ‘good pastoral support’ when giving me the names of schools, a limitation which should be noted.

Findings from the current study also suggest that my research may be limited due to the narrow definition of ‘success’ I used to recruit participants. In line with the majority of the literature, I focused on YP’s improved attendance as the single criteria

important for a ‘successful return’ and did not acknowledge the emotional well-being of YP over time.

Due to time restrictions and the aims of the current research, this study only engaged with the first two stages of AI, discovery and dream, with two participant groups, YP and parents. Other researchers have also used this approach to explore the ‘best of what is’ in situations and explore desirable futures with participants. Elliott (1999) proposes that, in order to support change, the full process of AI requires long-term engagement over time with a range of stakeholders. Findings from the current study, however, could be used by others as tools for reflection to inform thinking about their own research or practice which focuses on the needs of other individuals.

5.9 Future Research

The current research has identified factors which support YP to return to school following ESNA, from the perspectives of two YP and their parents. It has further identified what parents find supportive in their situations of ESNA. Participants in the current study suggested that the development of trusting interpersonal relationships supported feelings of being understood and motivation to change. However, the current research recognised that YP and parents may not always feel motivated to engage with others during ESNA. For this reason, research which focuses on developing an in depth understanding of ‘what works’ to support motivation, parental engagement and engagement of YP in cases of ESNA might be helpful to inform future practice.

Considering the possible impact of perceptions of gender on behaviour, and the fact that the current research involved two young men, it would be interesting to explore experiences of ESNA from the perspectives of young men and young women. Moreover, I wonder whether ESNA is conceptualised, managed and supported differently according to the gender of YP and perceptions of gender held by adults in situations of ESNA.

Findings from the current study suggest that previous research has employed a narrow definition of ‘success’ in cases of ESNA, focusing primarily on YP’s physical return to school as a measure of ‘successful involvement.’ Participants in the current

research highlighted that, despite a physical return to school, YP continued to experience feelings of unhappiness and worry, suggesting that conceptualisations of success in cases of ESNA should also consider the on-going emotional well-being of YP. Definitions of 'success' have generally been adult-led. It would be interesting to find out, from YP themselves, what they believe constitutes success in cases of ESNA. Moreover, findings from the current study propose that a return to school is not a single event, but an on-going process during which YP and their parents may experience set-backs and difficulties. With this in mind, it may be useful to conduct a longitudinal study of YP's experiences of ESNA, considering their attendance and emotional well-being over time and factors which supported these.

6. Conclusion

Although previous studies have explored the perceptions of non-attenders and their parents in relation to factors associated with extended school non-attendance (ESNA), few studies have focused on factors young people (YP) and parents found helpful in supporting a return to school. The voices of YP are under-represented in the literature on ESNA and studies which have concentrated on parental perceptions of ESNA have tended to focus on parent-led discourses about factors which support their child's school attendance, rather than those which support parents. Based on the first two phases of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), the current research aimed to identify what secondary-aged YP, and their parents, perceived was helpful in supporting a return to school following ESNA. Furthermore, it hoped to identify aspirational thinking about an ideal future in relation to support for extended school non-attenders and their parents. It was hoped that, through this, support could be further developed.

The following chapter will provide a summary of the research findings and outline the original contribution of the study. Following this the quality of the research will be evaluated. The chapter will end with a reflexive account of the research process and concluding comments. The findings of the current research highlight the nuanced way in which trusting interpersonal relationships may be developed between individuals and the processes by which these may support a return to school for YP and support parents in situations of ESNA.

6.1 Summary of findings

6.1.1 Research Question 1:

What do secondary-aged young people, who have returned to school following a period of extended school non-attendance, and their parents, perceive was helpful in supporting young people to return school?

The findings of the research suggest that that YP and their parents valued support through trusting interpersonal relationships with others. For YP this meant engagement in supportive peer relationships, and with adults who took a genuine

interest in them and were readily available. Through these relationships, YP were motivated to return to school and supported to recognise the impact of their ESNA. Parents felt it was important for others to gain a sound understanding of their experiences with ESNA, which they described as stressful and upsetting. They found it helpful to develop relationships with other parents, and with professionals who listened and attempted to understand their experiences. Parents suggested that their transparency had facilitated others' understanding of their situations and led to the adoption of more flexible, individualised approaches.

In terms of practical elements of support, YP appreciated feeling a sense of control over their return and valued a gradual and flexible return to school, during which they were supported to manage their individual worries. Parents felt supported by a clear system of home-school communication and access to external agencies through school. Whilst the sample size used for the current research was small, findings were generally supported by previous research in the context of ESNA, as outlined in chapter 5.

6.1.2 Research Question 2:

What do these secondary-aged young people, and their parents, perceive to be desirable support for extended school non-attenders and their parents and what would they like to see implemented in the future?

YP suggested that they would have valued even more support through trusting relationships, describing that they would have been more motivated to return to school had their peers kept in more regular contact during ESNA and had adults been more available for them. YP also recommended that they would have liked their views to have been listened to more, although they highlighted that they had found it difficult to make sense of and articulate their experiences with ESNA. In relation to the practical return to school, it was proposed that YP valued being given control over their return. They suggested that the return should be managed in a flexible manner, ensuring that the needs of individual YP are addressed sensitively.

Parents suggested that increased social support would be helpful, including the creation of opportunities to develop relationships with other parents in similar situations. Parents felt that others having an even better understanding of their

experiences would facilitate the adoption of a more flexible, compassionate and individualised approaches to support, as opposed to the more universal and punitive approaches they had experienced. It was suggested that easier access to appropriate support from external agencies would be valued in the future and that schools should aim for earlier identification of difficulties with attendance and timely communication of these with parents.

6.1.3 Additional findings

Findings relating to perceptions about the nature of ESNA were identified as pertinent to the possible development of future support for extended school non-attenders and their parents. Participants spoke about the general perception that ESNA could be easily 'fixed' and tended to focus on success in cases of ESNA as the young person's physical return to school. Despite this, YP who participated in the current study were still unhappy at school, suggesting that the emotional well-being of YP was given little attention.

6.1.4 The appreciative model

Findings of the current study add to research evidence which suggests that factors that support a return to school following ESNA are multi-faceted, dynamic and interactive. In light of these findings, an appreciative model was developed as part of the current research. This model outlines factors which may support YP to return to school following a period of ESNA and the process through which YP and parents in the current study were supported. Further details of the models can be found in section 5.5.

6.1.5 Research implications

Outlined in section 5.6, the findings of the current research may have implications for the way in which schools, Local Authorities (LAs) and Educational Psychology Services support extended school non-attenders and their parents. Findings suggest that the development of trusting interpersonal relationships was integral to supporting YP and parents in the current study. Educational Psychologists (EPs) have the skills and knowledge necessary to be able to support the development of trusting relationships between individuals. Findings also imply that the needs of YP and their families should be at the centre of support. It may be important for schools, LAs and

professionals to work collaboratively with YP and their parents, ensuring participation and shared decision-making. LAs, schools and Educational Psychology Services may need to reflect on the systems they have in place to support extended school non-attenders. Participants in the current study suggested they were unable to access appropriate support and did not feel that a universal approach was effective in supporting school attendance. On-going support for extended school non-attenders and their parents also seems to be important as YP may still experience difficulties, even once they have returned to school. The findings of the current research have theoretical and practical implications for the way in which 'success' is defined in cases on ESNA, both in the literature and in practice. Current conceptualisations of 'success' tend to focus on the young person's physical return to school, failing to acknowledge their emotional well-being over time.

6.2 Original contribution

The study contributes to the evidence base in the context of ESNA by capturing the unique voices of two YP who had returned to school following ESNA and their parents. Very little research in the context of ESNA has captured and represented the voices of those who experience ESNA, especially in relation to factors individual YP and their parents found helpful in supporting a return to school.

The findings of the current study also add a unique insight into the processes through which trusting relationships were developed for YP and parents involved in the current study, and how these relationships facilitated motivation and positive change for participants.

In the context of qualitative research, Tracy (2010) suggests that studies can have theoretical and practical significance. The current research may challenge theoretical and practical assumptions about how success is defined in cases of ESNA, suggesting that it may be important for this notion to encompass the emotional well-being of YP alongside a focus on the YP's physical return to school.

An appreciative model has been developed as part of the current research. This original model may act as a helpful tool for schools, Educational Psychologists and LAs who are hoping to support extended school non-attenders and their parents.

6.3 Quality criteria

As outlined in Chapter 3, Elliott et al. (1999) suggest that qualitative research can be evaluated based on criteria which consider how well a study's research aims are addressed in a useful and meaningful way. Quality criteria used for quantitative research, such as validity, reliability and generalisability are less applicable to qualitative research, which is concerned with developing an understanding of a specific topic in a given context, rather than replicability of findings across populations. As outlined in section 3.4, Tracy (2010) suggests that the quality of qualitative research can be considered in relation to the following criteria; the worthiness and relevance of a research topic, including its significant contribution, research rigour, sincerity, transparency and reflexivity, credibility of interpretations, the way in which research has been effectively communicated to resonate with the reader, and consideration of ethical issues. For the purpose of this section, the criteria will be addressed under the following headings; research rigour, transparency and consideration of ethical issues. It was felt that these headings captured the essence of most of the criteria outlined by Tracy (2010).

In line with Elliott et al. (1999), I feel that the aims of the current research were addressed in a useful and meaningful way. A summary of the findings of the current study in relation to the research aims can be found in section 6.1 which also highlights the development of an appreciative model for possible use in practice to support cases of ESNA. The original contribution of the current research is outlined is section 6.2.

6.3.1 Research rigour

The current study aimed to clearly outline the procedures used during data analysis and data interpretation. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, a prescribed method of analysis, to aid research rigour and transparency. Their 6 phases were followed closely throughout the analysis process and a description of this process can be found in section 3.11.1. To ensure rigour, initial interpretations of the data and prospective themes were discussed with my thesis supervisor in an on-going manner and some of them were re-visited and modified over a number of months between February and May 2018 to ensure that I felt that they represented the dataset.

Weick (2007) proposes that rigorous qualitative research is 'rich' in nature, suggesting that examples of the data should be outlined, and interpretations explained. When presenting the research findings, verbatim quotes were used from participants to represent themes and salient points. This was done with the aim of providing evidence of the way in which I had engaged with the data, my interpretations of it, and with the hope of allowing the reader to make their own interpretations about what I had identified.

6.3.2 Transparency

Throughout the research process I aimed to ensure I was transparent. This included transparency at the beginning of the study regarding the motivations of the research, and my own assumptions and value-bases. Details of these are outlined in sections 1.3 and 3.5. Tuval-Mashiach (2017) suggests that transparency is important; as it gives others the opportunity to adopt similar methods in future research. Transparency in qualitative research further refers to open-ness about the way in which participants were recruited and data was collected and analysed. I have aimed to be transparent about the decisions I made throughout the process of my research, including the selection of my methodology, methods, data analysis and decisions about data presentation. These justifications are outlined in Chapter 3. In order to ensure transparency about participant recruitment and data collection, I have provided copies of the documents used for recruitment and the interview schedules used for data collection, in order to give the reader an insight into the research context. As outlined in the section above, verbatim quotes were used from participants throughout the findings chapter, with the hope of illuminating the way in which I engaged with the data. Self-reflexivity in relation to the research process is also outlined by Tracy (2010) as a marker of transparent research. This, she suggests, includes the disclosure of the challenging or unexpected aspects of the research. A reflexive account, in which I outline my perceived role in the research process and its challenges, will be outlined in section 6.4.

6.3.3 Consideration of ethical issues

Tracy (2010) highlights that procedural, situational, relational and exiting ethical issues can exist within qualitative research. Procedural ethics refer to issues around consent and informing participants about the possible consequences of the research.

Situational ethics focuses on issues which may arise from the specific circumstances of the research, in this case ethical decisions relating to working with YP who had experienced ESNA and their parents. The recognition of mutual respect between participant and researcher defines relational ethics, which focuses on the importance of researcher mindfulness in relation to their values and actions and the consequences of these for others within research. Lastly, exiting ethics is concerned with how a research situation is managed after data has been collected, including the support participants are left with and the way in which findings are shared. Evidence of a focus on the ethical issues presented during the research process can be found throughout Chapter 3. Careful consideration was given to the way in which research findings were shared. I conducted the research within one secondary school and was mindful that the staff I shared initial findings with might know which YP had participated in the study and that findings would, in part, reflect school systems and practice. I found the framework of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) useful when sharing initial findings with school staff as it focused on positive aspects of support and on re-framing factors which some participants had spoken about negatively, through a focus on the possibility for change. Initial findings were positively received when shared with staff at the school in which the research was conducted in June 2018. The school commented particularly on the perceived usefulness of the model. Summaries of the research, written to cater for school staff, parents and YP, were disseminated in early September 2018 and initial findings were shared in the form of a presentation with the Educational Psychology Service in which I was based in July 2018.

6.4 Reflexive account

Basit (2010, p. 220) describes reflexivity as *"reflection, introspection and critical self-analysis during the research",* a process through which a researcher acknowledges the way in which their assumptions and beliefs may have impacted upon the research process. Having chosen an interpretivist philosophy for the current research, I was acutely aware of the impact of my subjectivity on the research process. I have aimed to provide transparency and reflexivity throughout the study and I will now provide a reflexive account of the research process.

6.4.1 Defining ESNA

At the beginning of the research process, careful consideration was required in choosing which definition of school non-attendance I wanted to use for the study. Through reading about 'school refusal', 'emotionally based non-attendance' or 'extended school non-attendance', it seemed that an agreed definition of non-attendance behaviour did not exist. Some definitions alluded to the perceived causality of non-attendance and I wanted to enter into the research without assumptions about this in relation to the experiences of others. For this reason, I chose the descriptive term 'extended school non-attendance' (Pellegrini, 2007).

6.4.2 The recruitment process

Decisions about recruitment criteria also required careful consideration. Many of the studies I read in the context of ESNA did not outline specific recruitment criteria and those that did differed in their conceptualisations of what constituted 'non-attendance' and 'good attendance.' For the current research, I was concerned with finding definitions of 'extended school non-attendance' and 'good attendance.' Discovering the research of Reid and his strategic approaches to tackling 'school absenteeism', including his use of the traffic light scheme was useful for framing my decisions. In the hope of supporting schools, Reid (2003a) bracketed and defined attendance according to the percentage of sessions YP had attended e.g. the red group were below 70% attendance, the blue group; 71-84%, yellow group; 85-95% and the green group had an attendance percentage of over 96. With the hope of working flexibly with different school definitions of good and poor attendance, these groupings provided a useful basis for my recruitment, details of which are outlined in section 3.9.1. In keeping with the research of Nuttall and Woods (2013) I was originally going to use 'anxiety as a presenting feature' of the young person's 'non-attendance' as part of my recruitment criteria. However, I considered that the use of this might present a more clinical focus and imply causality, a feature of the study I wanted to avoid. I considered how 'anxiety' might be defined and by whom. Would YP require a clinical diagnosis to participate and would this be judged by adults around them? My decision for recruitment to focus on non-clinical samples of YP with improved attendance, rather than on possible clinical causality of non-attendance, led me to remove this criterion.

The context of the Educational Psychology Service in which I was based whilst conducting the research raised challenges in terms of recruitment. Due to staff capacity, the link model had been removed and EPs were engaging solely in work for statutory assessments. EPs had not had on-going relationships with schools for over two years and, in the absence of these relationships, I found recruitment difficult. Through this situation, I recognised the power of trusting professional relationships and was keen to meet with schools as soon as possible to build rapport at the very beginning of the recruitment process.

The sample size for the current study was smaller than I had anticipated. When I embarked on the research, I was highly aware of the emotive nature of the topic and the small number of YP who may have returned to school following ESNA. Two YP in two separate schools felt unable to participate in the study once their parents had given consent for them to do so and information about the research had been passed on. In these situations, I recognised my feelings of frustration and, although I would have liked both YP to have participated, I ensured that I remained compassionate and reassured parents that YP were not obliged to take part. This highlighted the challenges of conducting research with vulnerable groups and the sensitivities required during the recruitment process to manage the emotional well-being of others.

The recruitment process also raised some interesting dilemmas around informed consent and power dynamics. I wondered how informed YP felt about the study and offered to meet face-to-face to discuss it further, without any pressure for them to participate. However, I also recognised the power dynamics present within the relationship. YP may have felt obliged to take part because a professional adult had asked them if they were interested in doing so. Both YP did not want to meet and I worried that I had triggered negative feelings for them. I reflected on what I might have done differently to alleviate worries about participation and wondered if a face-to-face meeting before distributing information may have been useful. In this situation, I informed the school and signposted parents to appropriate support. Alongside ethical dilemmas relating to consent, this experience highlighted the on-going nature of difficulties with school attendance for YP. The recruitment criteria for the current research assumed that any difficulties had ended once a young person had returned to school. My experience with recruitment and the findings of the

current study suggested this was not the case, and that YP may find it particularly emotive to speak about their experiences after months or years have passed. This was an aspect of the research which surprised me but which, in hindsight, I now recognise as highly important.

On reflection, I feel that I could have approached the recruitment process differently so that the research was communicated more effectively and any worries of potential participants were alleviated at the earliest opportunity. In hindsight, rather than relying on letters and information sheets, passed on through school staff, to recruit participants, it may have been more effective for me to hold information sessions about the research with potential participants within schools. These sessions would have been good opportunities to build initial relationships with YP and parents, clearly communicate the research process and discuss any concerns.

6.4.3 The interviews

Due to the emotive nature of the research, difficulties with recruitment and the time constraints of the current study, I reflected on the importance of building rapport with YP and parents, in order that they felt comfortable to share their experiences with me. I was pleased that I was able to build rapport successfully at the beginning of interviews and enjoyed getting to know individual participants. I was surprised by their openness and willingness to share and felt privileged to be listening to their stories. I was also surprised by the way in which YP seemed to reflect, with great insight, on their experiences. Looking back at this, I wonder if I was surprised because I was carrying assumptions about how reflective young men might be. This highlighted the importance of being open-minded when meeting others for the first time and of examining my assumptions before, during and after meetings. Listening to the stories of others also highlighted the benefits of this process for those who are listened to and those who listen, in terms of instilling a sense of understanding and shared narrative between individuals.

6.4.4 Data analysis

The process of data analysis felt challenging at times. Although I found it helpful to use Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis, I found myself re-visiting the data a number of times and attempting to view it in different ways. I was

concerned that I was being too literal in my interpretations of the data or had become too focused on patterns, codes and themes which did not answer the research questions. Discussing my thoughts with my supervisor in relation to this was supportive and highlighted the importance of supervision when one is attempting to develop ideas and reflect on decisions.

6.4.5 Personal reflections

The process of undertaking this research has been invaluable in encouraging my independent and critical thinking and in developing my identity as a researcher and Trainee Educational Psychologist. At times, I felt like I wanted advice or reassurance from others in relation to the research. As it progressed, I realised that I needed to be able to justify my own decisions and explain them to others, a skill which is integral to a career in Educational Psychology. The research process also gave me the opportunity to practice balancing a number of competing demands. At times this has felt overwhelming but has taught me how to manage my time effectively and prioritise my workload.

6.5 Chapter summary and concluding comments

This chapter has provided a summary of the main findings of the current research and outlined its implications and original contribution. The chapter has also offered a critical consideration of the quality of the current study and a reflexive account of the research process.

The current study aimed to identify what secondary-aged YP, and their parents, perceived was helpful in supporting YP's return to school, and what they would like to see implemented in the future. The study hoped to contribute information towards developing practical support for extended school non-attenders and their parents. Findings indicate that YP and parents found trusting relationships important in supporting a return to school and suggest that these facilitated environments of collaborative working in which YP and parents were put at the centre of decision-making processes and their needs were understood. In line with previous research, findings of the current study suggest that factors which may support a return to school following ESNA are multi-faceted, dynamic and interactive. An appreciative

model was developed to reflect this. This model may act as a useful tool for Educational Psychologists, schools, and professionals as they consider how YP and parents might be better supported in situations of ESNA.

The research has implications for the way in which ‘success’ in cases of ESNA is conceptualised, both within the literature and in practice, and suggests that educational professionals should work systemically to support the well-being of young people and their parents over time.

7. References

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8. Appendices

Appendix 1: Systematic search grid

Database	Search Term	Results Found	Refinement	No. relevant
16.11.17 PsycINFO (selected through OVID) Limits applied: 2000-Current English Language Peer reviewed journal	School refusal OR School non-attendance OR Extended non-attendance OR School avoidance OR school absenteeism AND Experiences OR Perceptions OR Attitudes OR views OR Perspectives AND Intervention OR reintegration OR return to school OR support OR solution OR recommendation OR help	39	Inclusion and exclusion criteria applied	7
	School refusal search terms AND Intervention search terms	168	as above	21
	School refusal terms AND Experiences terms	101	as above	8
16.11.17 ERIC British Education Index Child Development and Adolescent Studies Education Abstracts	School refusal OR School non-attendance OR extended non-attendance OR school absenteeism OR school avoidance AND intervention OR reintegration OR return to school OR support OR solution OR recommendation OR help AND	77	As above	8

Teacher Reference Center (Via EBSCO Host)	experiences OR perceptions OR attitudes OR views OR perspectives			
	School refusal search terms AND Intervention search terms	228	As above	19
	School refusal terms AND Experiences terms	173	As above	10

EthOS 9.11.17 Limits: 2000-2017	School refusal	86 (71 available)	As above	6
	School non-attendance	166 (141 available)	As above	5
	School absenteeism	35 (30 available)	As above	2
Educational Psychology in Practice Limits: 2000-2017	School refusal (encompassed other phrases including non-attendance)	56	As above	6
British Journal of Educational Psychology	School refusal	53	As above	0

Educational Psychology Review	School refusal	7	As above	1
Psychology in the Schools	School refusal	138	As above	1
Google Scholar Limits: 2000-2017	School refusal	256,000	As above	6
	School non-attendance	17,100	As above	6
DfE (after 2014)	School attendance	1,283	As above	3

Search terms re-entered in June 2018:

1 additional paper identified from PsycINFO: Wallace's (2018) study

Appendix 2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria applied to articles during the systematic literature search

Inclusion	Exclusion
Study focuses on school attendance Young people showing a reluctance to attend school (school refusal) Education-based studies Young people are school-aged (5-18) Post-2000 unless seminal Written in English Peer reviewed literature and book chapters Grey literature and theses Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework (studies consider different influencing factors related to ESNA and intervention) Study focuses on intervention for 'school refusal' Considering experiences, views and perceptions of parents and YP in relation to ESNA and/or intervention UK based research (or research which took place in countries which have westernised education systems e.g. Australia, US, Canada, New Zealand, Europe)	YP have been excluded by school Non-attendance is due to a medical condition or is on medical grounds e.g. chronic illness , asthma, flu, common colds YP are not school aged (5-18) YP are 'inpatients' as part of a clinical group linked with diagnoses of anxiety and depression Study focuses on the attendance of teachers at school, on task avoidance rather than school avoidance, or on attendance of after school programmes Study focuses on raising general school attendance rather than on individual YP as extended school non-attenders Pre-2000 unless seminal Not written in English A review of a book or article Studies did not take place in a western society (e.g. not in UK, Australia, US, Canada, New Zealand, European studies)

Appendix 3: Ethical approval for the research

24.04.2017

Dear Eleanor

Thank you for responding so fully to the SPS REC's comments regarding your study: *Going back to school after a period of extended school non-attendance: what do young people and their parents/carers find helpful? An Appreciative Inquiry.*

Please take this email as confirmation of ethical approval from the SPS REC. If you require a formal letter of approval, please contact Zaheda.

Please let me know if your research plan changes, you may need an amendment to your ethical approval.

with best wishes

Beth

Appendix 4: Recruitment letter for schools

Ellie Mortimer
Norah Fry Research Centre for Disability Studies
8 Priory Road
Bristol, BS8 1TX
em15168@bristol.ac.uk
07716 143820
www.bristol.ac.uk/norahfry

Going back to school after a period of extended school non-attendance: what do young people and their parents/carers find helpful?

My name is Ellie Mortimer and I am a third year Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Bristol. I am currently on a two-year placement with X Educational Psychology Service. As part of my doctoral training I am conducting a piece of research which is due to be completed in September 2018.

I am interested in finding out about what helps young people to start attending school again after a period of extended school non-attendance. I am also interested in what their parents/carers find helpful in encouraging them to return to school. In order to find this out, I am looking to speak to young people, aged between 11 and 18, who have returned to school after a period of extended non-attendance. In total, I hope to interview two or three young people and their parents/carers.

Research aims and objectives:

I am hoping that this research will help us further understand what can support young people to start attending school again regularly, alongside what their parents/carers find supportive too.

The objectives of the research are:

- To identify what young people and their parents/carers found helpful in the return back to school following a period of non-attendance
- To identify what young people and their parents/carer would like to see implemented for others in similar situations the future
- To contribute information towards developing further practical support for young people and their parents when young people are experiencing periods of school non-attendance

Secondary schools' participation in the research:

Please consider whether or not there are students at your school who meet the following criteria and may be interested in taking part in the study:

1. In the past, the school attendance of the student had fallen below 70% for a period of a term or more
2. During this period of non-attendance, young people primarily remained at home with parental/carer knowledge when absent during school hours
3. During this period, young people displayed a reluctance or refusal to attend school
4. The young person's attendance is now at 95% or above and has been for a period of a term or more
5. Extended school non-attendance and re-attendance of the student at school happened within the last two years

N.B. The attendance percentages of 70% and below to represent 'extended non-attendance' and 95% and above to represent 'good attendance' are purely used as guidelines for discussion. These are not strict criteria and can be modified according to a young person's specific situation or school attendance criteria.

If so, I would be keen to discuss the project in more detail with your school. Should you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me using the information below.

Yours sincerely,

Ellie Mortimer

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Tel: 07716 143820

Email: em15168@bristol.ac.uk

Appendix 5: Recruitment letter for parents

Ellie Mortimer
Norah Fry Research Centre for Disability Studies
8 Priory Road
Bristol, BS8 1TX
em15168@bristol.ac.uk
07716 143820
www.bristol.ac.uk/norahfry

Dear Parent/Carer

My name is Ellie Mortimer and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist. I work with X Council's Educational Psychology Service. Educational Psychologists work with young people, families and schools to try and improve situations for young people. One of the things Educational Psychologists do is look at the things which help young people to feel happy to attend school.

I am interested in finding out about what helps young people to go back to school after they've experienced some difficulty with attendance. To find out about this I would like to talk to young people who have returned to school after experiencing a period of attendance difficulty in the past. I would also like to talk to their parents/carers too to find out what they thought was helpful. You have been given this letter because your child returned to school after a period of difficulty with attendance and I am interested in finding out what you thought was helpful in your situation. I am hoping that the research will help us begin to understand what can help young people to attend school again after a period of non-attendance, alongside what can support their parents and carers too.

I would like to invite you and your child to speak to me about your experiences. I hope to interview two or three families in total. If you decide that you would like to take part in the study, we would speak on the phone so that I could explain the research to you in more detail and arrange to meet for the interviews, at a time and place convenient for you and your child. I have attached an information sheet with more detailed information about the research which should answer any questions you might have at this stage.

I hope that you feel able to be involved in this research project. If you are interested in taking part, please read the information sheet and return the attached form.

Yours Sincerely,

Ellie Mortimer

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Appendix 6: Recruitment letter for young people

Ellie Mortimer
Norah Fry Research Centre for Disability Studies
8 Priory Road
Bristol, BS8 1TX
em15168@bristol.ac.uk
07716 143820
www.bristol.ac.uk/norahfry

Dear Student,

My name is Ellie Mortimer and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist. Educational Psychologists work with young people, families and schools to try and make things better for young people. One of the things we do is look at the things which help young people to feel happy to go to school.

I am doing a project to find out about what young people think helped them to go back to school after they were out of school for a while. I am also interested in what their parents/carers found helpful too. You have been given this letter because you were out of school for some time and then went back to school. I am interested in finding out about what you thought might have helped you to start going back to school.

I would like to speak to you and your parent(s)/carer(s) about your experiences of going back to school. I hope to interview two or three families in total. If you decide that you would like to take part in the study, I would speak to your parent(s)/carer(s) and we would arrange a time and place to meet. I have attached an information sheet with more information about the project. Hopefully this should answer any questions you might have at the moment.

I hope that you feel able to take part in this project. If you would like to take part, please read the information sheet and tell your parent(s)/carer(s) that you would like to take part and return the attached form to school or send it to me using the envelope.

Yours Sincerely,

Ellie Mortimer

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Information sheet

For parents and carers

Going back to school after a period of extended school non-attendance: what do young people and their parents/carers find helpful?

What is the research about?

At some point in their lives, many children find it difficult to attend school. This can lead to extended periods of absence from school or intermittent patterns of attendance. Although some children may not return to school, others might and there are a number of things which could help with this return. You have been contacted because your child returned to school after a period of difficulty with attendance and I am interested in finding out what young people and their parents/carers found helpful in supporting this return.

The research will focus on the things you and your child thought were positive and helpful in supporting your child to go back to school. This type of research is called 'appreciative' and it looks at what worked well and what could be even better in the future.

Do I have to take part?

No. After reading this information sheet you can decide that you do not want you or your child to take part in the study and that's fine. There are a number of participation options for the study:

1) You give permission for yourself and your child to take part
2) You give permission for your child to take part, but you do not want to take part yourself
3) You want to take part, but you do not want your child to take part
   (Should you select option 3, we will check with your child that they are happy with this decision)

What will happen if I choose to take part?

I would **interview** you and your child separately, but preferably on the same day. These interviews could happen at school, your home or at my office in X. The interview will be conversation about your past and present experiences of your child's attendance at school, your views about what was helpful in their return to school and what you think could be helpful for others in the future. I would also ask your child the same things. You would not need to prepare anything for the interview.

If you are from a two parent/carer family you can choose to be interviewed with your child's other parent/carer or interviewed separately.

What if I change my mind?

Both you and your child can change your mind about being part of the study up to two weeks after the interviews. You can email or call me to let me know, up to two weeks after your interview date and I will take delete your interview information. After this date I may be writing about the interview and it may be too late to withdraw from the study. If you change your mind during the interview we can stop at any time. If you change your mind before the interview you can email or call me to cancel it and you will no longer be involved in the study.

Will my taking part in this research be confidential?

Any personal information I collect will be kept confidentially and anonymously throughout the project. This information will be stored on a password protected computer or in a locked filing cabinet. It will be kept safely for 20 years. When writing up the interviews I will use pseudonyms and your names will only be known to me. Although yours and your child's name will not be used in the write-up, due to the small number of people taking part, it is possible that the school staff, who originally spoke to you about this research, may know that you have taken part and could recognise you should they choose to read it. I have a duty of care as a researcher. This means that if you say something which makes me worried about your safety or the safety of your child, we will need to share this information with the relevant professionals.

Will I be recorded and how will recorded information be used?

Our interview and my interview with your child will be audio recorded. The interview recordings will be encrypted and stored on a password protected computer. I will be the only one with access to the password. I may use written quotes of some of the things you and your child say during our interviews in the main write up of the research, although your names will not be used. In September 2018, once I have finished my research write-up, I will destroy the recordings.

What will happen with the information?

I will write a summary sheet outlining the general findings of the study which I will send to you and the other families involved in the study.

The research is due to be completed by September 2018. It will be written up and submitted to the University of Bristol as part of the course requirement for a Doctorate in Educational Psychology. I will write a shorter summary of the research to be shared with you and with other Educational Psychologists at X Council, in the hope that support for other young people and their parents/carers can be improved. You child's school may also be interested in reading the summary paper. After I finish my qualification, it is possible that a shorter version of my research paper might be published in an online journal. A copy of the full research might be available online in the future. You will not be identifiable in any of my written work and the name of any schools or the County will not be included.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved by the University of Bristol's School for Policy Studies' Ethics Committee. The University's Ethics Committee makes sure that all research done by students at the University of Bristol meets their ethical standards.

What next?

You are welcome to call or email me if you have any questions. You can use the email address and telephone number below. If you are interested in taking part in the study you can call or

email me or complete the attached form. You can return this form to school or send it to me at work using the stamp addressed envelope:

Address: Ellie Mortimer
X

Email: em15168@bristol.ac.uk

Tel: 07716 143820

Should you have any further questions or concerns please get in touch with my research supervisors:

Dr Rob Green: mhxrg@bristol.ac.uk

Dr Dan O'Hare: dan.ohare@bristol.ac.uk Tel: 0117 331062

Appendix 8: Expression of interest form for parents

Expression of interest form

For parents/carers who are interested in themselves and/or their child taking part in: Going back to school after non-attendance: what do young people and their parents/carers find helpful?

Name of parent(s)/carer(s): _____

Name of child: _____

Year group of child: _____

Name of child's school: _____

Please select one of the following options (tick the box which applies):

1) I would like both myself and my child to participate in the research and I give consent for my child to be contacted about it ☐

2) My child can be invited to take part, but I do not want to take part ☐

3) I want to take part in the research but I do not want my child to take part ☐

I would like to take part and am from a two parent/carer family (tick the box which applies):

a) As parents/carers we would like to be interviewed together ☐

b) As parents/carers we would like to be interviewed separately ☐

Please fill in as much information as you can below. I will use this information to contact you:

Telephone number(s): _____

Email address(es): _____

Address(es):_____

_____

How would you like to be contacted? _____

Please use the envelope to post this form to me or return it to school

Thank you for your interest – I will be in contact soon

Information sheet

For young people

Going back to school after school non-attendance: what do young people and their parents/carers find helpful?

What is this project about?

At some point in their lives, lots of people find it difficult to go to school. Sometimes this means people miss days of school or stop going all together for a while. Although some people might not go back to school, others will go back and there are lots of things which could help them to do this.

I am doing a project about what young people think helped them to go back to school after they were out of school for a while. You have been given this information because you went back to school after being out of school for some time. I am interested in finding out about what you thought was helpful in getting you to go back to school. I also want to speak to parents and carers too to find out about what they found helpful.

Do I have to take part?

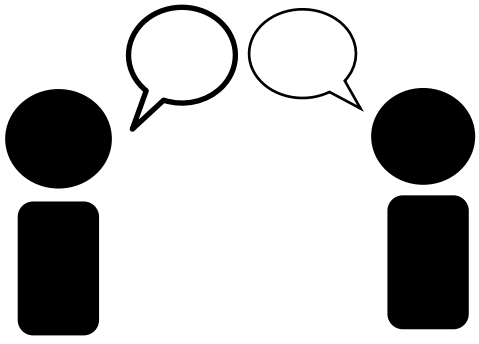
No. After reading this you can decide that you don't want to take part and that's fine.

You can decide not to be part of the study even if your parent(s)/carer(s) give permission for you to be involved.

However, you might choose to take part in the project and your parent(s)/carer(s) have a choice too. Three things might happen:

1) You and your parent(s)/carer(s) both want to be part of the project and I will interview you both separately.
2) Your parents(s)/carer(s) decide that they don't want to take part but they can still give permission for you to be interviewed.
3) If you don't want to take part but your parent(s)/carer(s) do, I will interview them but only if you're happy with this.

What will happen in I choose to take part?



I would speak to you about your experiences of school and we might do some creative activities too (drawing or card games) during an interview. This interview could happen at school, your home or at my office in X. You would not need to prepare anything for the interview. If your parent(s)/carer(s) choose to be interviewed I will speak to them too.

What if I change my mind?

If you decide that you don't want to be involved with the project, please let your parent(s)/carer(s) know. They can call me until two weeks after your interview and I will delete your information. After the two weeks it might be too late because I will be writing about your interview.

If you change your mind before the interview we can cancel it. If you change your mind during the interview, we can stop at any time.

Will other people know I have taken part in this project?

People who have worked with you at school might know that you chose to take part and might recognise some of the things you said if they read the paper I write. You might also want to tell other people about what you are doing as part of the project and that's fine.

I will keep any information I have about you on a computer with a password or in a locked cabinet. Information will be kept safely for 20 years. When I am writing about the interviews I will give you a different name and I will be the only one to know your real name. When we work together, if you say something which makes me worried about your safety or the safety of anyone else, we will need to share this information with other people.

What will happen to the interview information?

Our interview will be audio recorded. No-one, apart from me, will be able to listen to the recording. I will write down everything from the recording and include some of it in an essay about the project. In the future, the essay might be available online, although people won't be able to recognise you because I won't use your real name. After my interviews with all the families who take part in the study, I will write you a letter to tell you about the general findings of the study.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

The project has been ethically approved by the University of Bristol's School for Policy Studies' Ethics Committee. This means that my teachers have looked at my project to make sure I keep everyone safe whilst I'm doing it.

What next?

If you would like to take part in the project you can tell your parent(s)/carer(s) who will tell me. You can also fill in the attached form and give it to your form teacher at school or send it to the address below using the envelope.

If you have any worries or questions your parent(s)/carer(s) can contact me:

Address: Ellie Mortimer
X

Email: em15168@bristol.ac.uk

Tel: 07716 143820

If you have any more questions or worries, your parent(s)/carer(s) can speak to my teachers at university:

Dr Rob Green: mhxrg@bristol.ac.uk Tel: 0117 331062

Dr Dan O'Hare: dan.ohare@bristol.ac.uk

Appendix 10: Expression of interest form for young people

Expression of interest form

For young people who are interested in taking part in:

Going back to school after extended school non-attendance: what do young people and their parents/carers find helpful?

Your name: _____

Name(s) of your parent(s)/carer(s): _____

Name of your school: _____

Your year group: _____

Please use the envelope to post this form to me or return it to a member of school staff

Thank you for your interest – I will contact you soon.

Appendix 11: Consent form for parents

University of BRISTOL

norah fry research centre

For office use only
ID Number:

Consent form for parents/carers

Going back to school after extended school non-attendance: what do young people and their parents/carers find helpful?

Please tick the boxes to consent

Part 1: my consent

1. **Consent to take part**

I have read and understood the information sheet for the study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. Yes ☐ No ☐

I agree to take part in the study. I know that I can change my mind about participating, or my child can change their mind, until two weeks after our interviews without giving reasons with withdrawal. Yes ☐ No ☐

2. **Consent to be interviewed and recorded**

I agree to take part in a digitally recorded interview (audio only) with Ellie Mortimer. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that the recording will be transcribed, anonymised and analysed by Ellie Mortimer only. Yes ☐ No ☐

Part 2: consent for my child

3. **Consent for my child to take part**
I give consent for my child to take part in the study and know that my child can change their mind about participating until two weeks after their interview. Yes ☐ No ☐

4. **Consent for my child to be interviewed and recorded**
I give consent for my child to take part in a digitally recorded interview (audio only) with Ellie Mortimer. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that the recording will be transcribed, anonymised and analysed by Ellie Mortimer only. Yes ☐ No ☐

5. Consent to how the interview will be used

I understand that our interviews will be written up and presented in Ellie's doctoral thesis Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that the information may also be presented in a short summary paper, published in an online journal and presented to other Educational Psychologists and schools. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that a short summary sheet of the general findings of The study will be sent to all participants involved in the study. Yes ☐ No ☐

6. Consent to understanding anonymity

I understand that, although our contributions will be made anonymous, they may be identifiable to people who read the research and know we have taken part. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that direct quotes may be used from interviews, although our names will not be used in relation to these. Yes ☐ No ☐

7. Consent to confidentiality

The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained to me. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that, in line with the Data Protection Act, data collected about me will be stored in a password protected file on a University of Bristol computer and any files containing information about me will be made anonymous. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that, at the end of the project, anonymised data will be stored at the University of Bristol for 20 years. Yes ☐ No ☐

Signature of parent(s)/carer(s): _____

Name of parent(s)/carer(s): _____

Date: _____

Name of child: _____

Child's school: _____

Appendix 12: Consent form for young people

University of BRISTOL

norah fry research centre

For office use only
ID Number:

Consent form for young people

Going back to school after extended school non-attendance: what do young people and their parents/carers find helpful?

Please tick the boxes to agree (consent)

1. Agreement to take part

I have read and understood the information sheet and I asked any questions I needed to. Yes ☐ No ☐

I agree to take part in the project. I know that I can choose to leave the project at any time, until two weeks after my interview and I don't have to say why. Yes ☐ No ☐

If you ticked **'Yes'** please move to **part 2**
If you ticked **'No'** please **choose one of these options**:

☐ I do not want to take part in the project but **I am happy** for my parent(s)/carer(s) to be interviewed by Ellie.

Or

☐ I do not want to take part in the project and **I do not** want my parent(s)/carer(s) to be interviewed by Ellie

2. Agree to be interviewed and recorded

I agree to take part in a recorded interview (sound only) with Ellie Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that only Ellie will listen to and write about my interview Yes ☐ No ☐

3. Agreement about how the interview will be used

I understand that my interview will be written about in an essay. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that other Educational Psychologists and teachers might read the essay. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that the essay might be read online in the future. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that a general summary of the findings of the project will be sent to all the people who were interviewed. Yes ☐ No ☐

4. Agreement to understanding anonymity

I understand that Ellie will not use my name when she writes About my interview. Yes ☐ No ☐

Although she won't use my name, I understand that other people, who know I have taken part in the study, might be able to recognise me because of the small number of people taking part. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that Ellie might use direct quotes of the things I say when she writes about my interview. Yes ☐ No ☐

5. Agreement to confidentiality

I understand that information about me will be kept safely on a computer at the University of Bristol. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that, at the end of the project, anonymous information about me (information which does not use my name) will be kept safely at the University of Bristol for 20 years. Yes ☐ No ☐

Signature: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

Name of parent(s)/carer(s): _____

Name of my school: _____

Appendix 13: Topic guide for interviews with parents

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to meet today. We're going to have a chat about your child's experiences of school attendance and your experiences too. We'll talk a bit about a time when they weren't going to school as regularly and then think about the things you think were useful in helping them to go back to school.

The interview is an appreciative interview which means that I'll be asking you questions about times when you saw things working at their best. I'll be asking you about the things you think your child found positive and helpful and the things you found, as a parent/carer, to be positive and helpful for you too. A lot of the time we focus on things that aren't working well, on the problems, so that we can fix them. But in this case, I want to focus on when things were working well so that we can find out how to do more of those things for other families and young people in similar situations. There aren't any right or wrong answers to the questions. I am just interested in finding out about your experiences and what you found helpful. Is that what you were expecting? Do you have any questions at this point?

Go through participants' information sheet together – answer any questions

Please don't feel that you have to answer all the questions I ask. It might be that you feel you can't think of anything in particular in response to the question and that's absolutely, we can just move on. If you feel uncomfortable with a question, you can let me know and we can move on. If you feel like you want to pause or stop the interview all together, just let me know and we can stop. Are you happy to go ahead? If so, we can sign the consent form.

About you
To start off, can you tell me a bit about yourself and your child?
Prompts:

- Tell me a bit about yourself and your family
- How long has your child been at their current school for? Which schools did they attend before this?
- Can you tell me a bit about your child's friendships?
- Do they have any hobbies?
- Is there anything important that they do outside of school?
- Anything else you think is relevant?

Extended School non-attendance
Activity: could use timeline to support conversation

Can you tell me about the time when x wasn't going to school very regularly?
Prompts:

- What was happening when they first started not attending? (Anything at school or outside of school?)
- How were you feeling during that time?
- When they weren't at school what did their typical day look like?
- How long were they not attending regularly for?
- Was there anyone who supported you during this time?

Their child's return to school
Can you tell me about when x started going to school again more regularly?

- Can you remember a 'first day back'? (if so, when was it? what happened on the day? Can you remember how you were feeling at the time? What did you find helpful on this day? Was there anything that happened before this day that you think was helpful for you?)
- Or do you think it happened more gradually than this?

What do you think was helpful in helping them to back to school more regularly?
Prompts:

- Is there anything other people did which you thought helped your child? What sorts of things did school put in place? Teachers at school? Your child? Friends? Others?
- Do you think there was anything which helped your child the most?
- **What do you think was helpful in supporting you?** Individuals/programmes?
- What did you do to help yourself during this time? What did you learn about yourself during this time and your strengths?
- Do you think there was anything which helped you the most?
- Anything else?
- What was different about the times x wasn't going to school regularly and during the times when they were?

Their child's current experience of school
How are things at the moment?
Prompts:
What are you finding helpful in relation to your child's school attendance?
What do you think they are finding helpful?
Would you like to see anything change to make things even better?

Exploration of current experience of school and what they think might make school even better for their child or if they feel anything can be improved in terms of their current situation.
Could use rating scale to explore this.

Recommendations for future
What would you like support to be like for others, in the future?
Prompts:
Let's imagine you meet x, they are the of x, he is in Year x and is finding it difficult to go to school at the moment.

- What advice would you have for them?
- What advice would you have for x (their son)?
- Would you have advice for school? Teachers?
- Would you have advice for his family/parents/carers?
- Would you have advice for his friends?
- Would you have advice for other adults, like me?

About what is most helpful in supporting him to go back to school?

- Is there anything else you think is important to talk about before we finish?

Debrief
How was that?
Do you have any questions?
Is there anything you spoke about which you don't want me to include in my thesis?
Is there anything you're feeling worried about in relation to my thesis?

Is there anything you're feeling worried about that you think it'll be helpful for school or others to know about?
Signposting to relevant pastoral support at school if necessary.

Explanation about what will be happening next: Over the next few weeks I'll be listening back to our interview and be writing about it. If you feel like you don't want me to write about our interview you can tell me now and I won't use it and that's absolutely fine. If you change your mind in the next two weeks, I can delete the interview. I'll be interviewing other people too and, once I've thought about what, generally, people have found helpful, I'll write some general findings which I'll send to you in the post. Is that okay? Do you have any questions about that at all? You can get in touch with me if you have any questions

N.B. is there anything you think I should change for my next interview? Questions? The way I ask something? Any of the activities?

Appendix 14: Topic guide for interviews with young people

Introduction
Thank you for taking the time to meet today. We're going to have a chat about your school attendance. We'll talk a bit about a time when you weren't going to school that regularly and then about the things you think were useful in helping you to go back to school.

The interview is an appreciative interview which means that I'll be asking you questions about times when you saw things working at their best. I'll be asking you about the things you found positive and helpful for going back to school more regularly. A lot of the time we focus on things that aren't working well, on the problems, so that we can fix them. But in this case, I want to focus on when things were working well so that we can find out how to do more of these things for other students in school. There aren't any right or wrong answers to the questions. I am interested in finding out more about you and your experiences.
Is that what you were expecting? Do you have any questions about that?

Go through participants' information sheet together – answer any questions

You don't have to answer all the questions I ask. If, during our chat, I ask a question and you feel like you don't want to answer it, you can just say so or, if you want, you can hold up the orange card and I'll move on to a different question. We can pause the interview at any time if you want to and we can stop it completely too and we don't have to carry on. If you want to pause or stop, just tell me or you can hold up the red card.

Are you happy to go ahead? If so, we can sign the consent form

About you
To start off, can you tell me a bit about yourself?
Prompts:
- Tell me about your friends and family, what do you like about school?
- Do you have any hobbies?
- How long have you been attending x school?
- Is there anything else?

Extended School non-attendance
Activity: could use timeline to support conversation

Can you tell me about the time when you weren't going to school very regularly?
Prompts:
- What was happening when you first started not attending? (Anything at school or outside of school?)
- How were you feeling during that time?
- What did you do whilst you were at home? Was anyone else there?
- How long were you not attending regularly for?
- Was there anyone who helped you during this time?

The return to school
Can you tell me about when you started going to school again more regularly?
Prompts:
- Can you remember a 'first day back'? (if so, when was it? what happened on the day? Can you remember how you were feeling at the time? What did you find helpful on this day? Was there anything that happened before this day that you think was helpful for you?)
- Or do you think it happened more gradually than this?

What do you think was helpful in helping you to go back to school more regularly?
Prompts:

- Were you feeling happier to attend school again? How did you know?
- Can you describe some of the things you were thinking, doing, and feeling during this time?
- Is there anything other people did which you thought was helpful? What sorts of things did school put in place? Teachers at school? Parents/carers? Friends? Other adults in your life?
- What did you do to help yourself during this time? What did you learn about yourself during this time and the things you're good at?
- Do you think there was anything which helped you the most?
- Anything else?
- What was different about the times you weren't going to school regularly and during the times when you were?

Could use prompt cards if necessary: these are the things that other people in similar situations to you said were helpful for them. Do you think any of these things were helpful for you? (Let me know if there's anything you don't understand about one of the cards). Use blank cards so they can add their own factors too.

After having spoken about them (noted down some of the factors): If you had to rank them in a pyramid (the most important at the top and then the least important factors at the bottom) where would you put each factor?

Current experience of school
How is school now?
Prompts:

- What's good about school now? E.g. are there subjects, activities you enjoy? What about your friends? What about the teachers? Anything else?
- What would you like to see change for school to be even better for you?
- Where would you rate school now on this scale from 0 – 10? Exploration of this

Recommendations for future
What would you like support to be like for others, in the future?
Prompts:
Let's imagine that you meet x, he is in Year 8 at your school and he's finding it difficult to come into school at the moment:

- What advice would you have for him? (3 pieces?)
- Would you have advice for school? Teachers?
- Would you have advice for his family/parents/carers?
- Would you have advice for his friends?
- Would you have advice for other adults, like me?

About what is most helpful in supporting him to go back to school?

Possible activity: Drawing a spider diagram of 'ideal plan' of helping the young person to go back to school.

Possible prompt: Looking back, what three wishes would you have for yourself to help you go back to school? What three wishes would you have for x in Year 8

- Is there anything else you think is important to talk about before we finish?

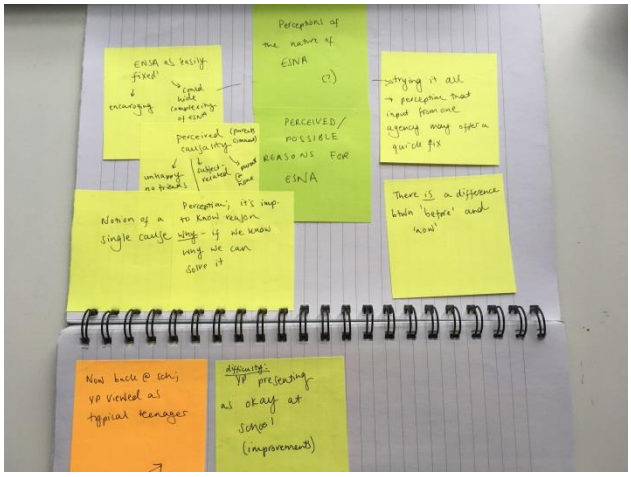
Debrief
How was that?
Do you have any questions?
Is there anything you spoke about which you don't want me to include in my thesis?
Is there anything you're feeling worried about in relation to my thesis?
Is there anything you're feeling worried about that you think it'll be helpful for school or parents/carers to know about?
Signposting to relevant pastoral support at school if necessary.

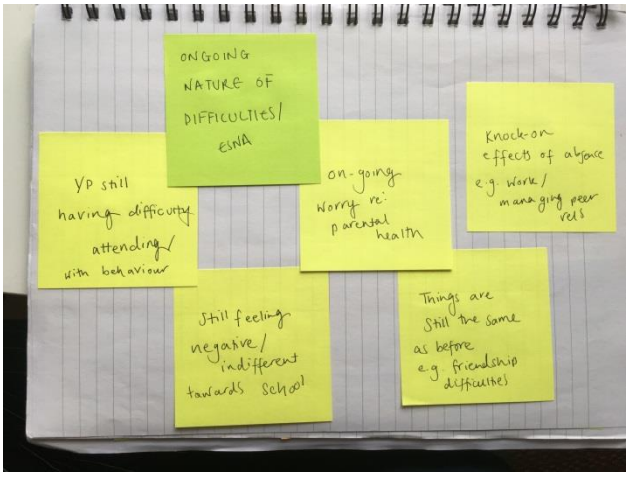
Explanation about what will be happening next: Over the next few weeks I'll be listening back to our interview and be writing about it. If you feel like you don't want me to write about our interview you can tell me now and I won't use it and that's absolutely fine. If you change your mind in the next two weeks, let your parents/carers know and I can delete the interview. I'll be interviewing other people too and, once I've thought about what, generally, people have found helpful, I'll write some general findings which I'll send to you in the post. Is that okay? Do you have any questions about that at all?

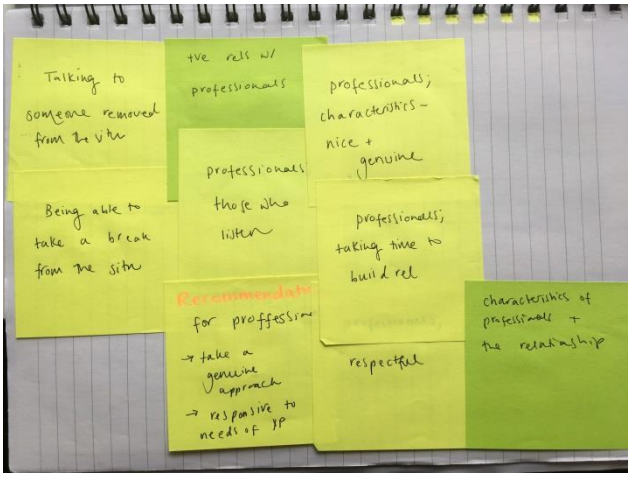
Your parents/carers can get in touch with me if you have any questions – they have my contact details

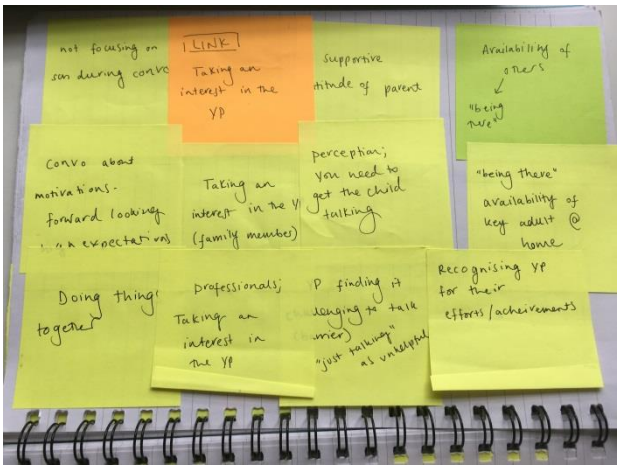
N.B. is there anything you think I should change for my next interview? Questions? The way I ask something? Any of the activities?

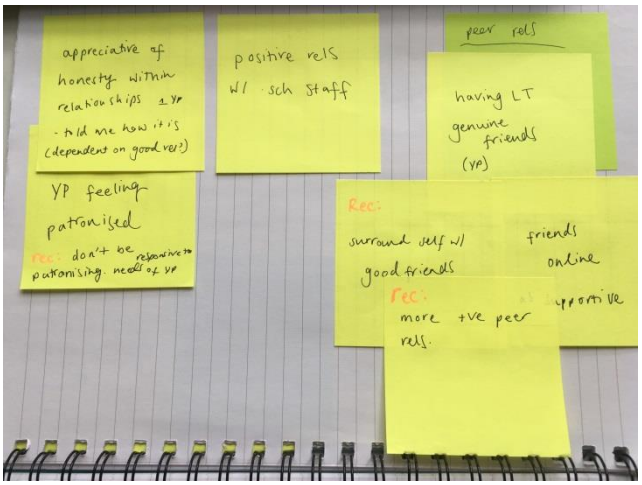
Appendix 15: Pictures of initial themes identified from the data

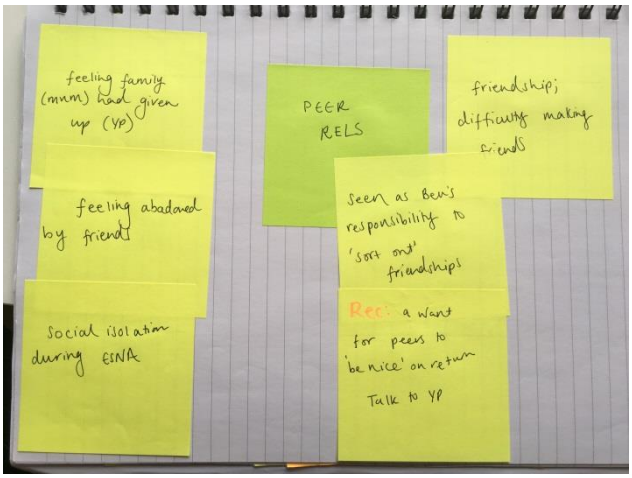


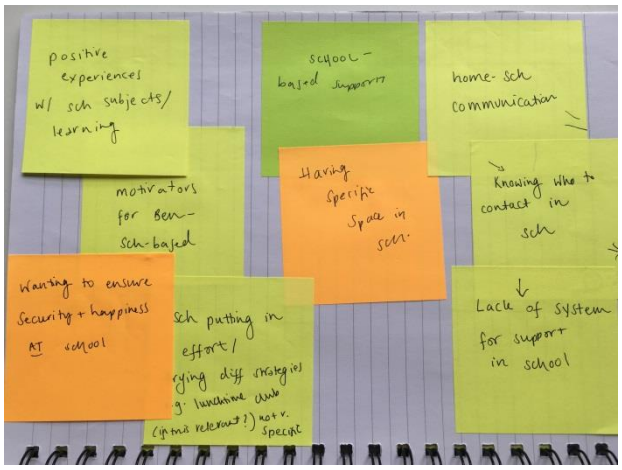




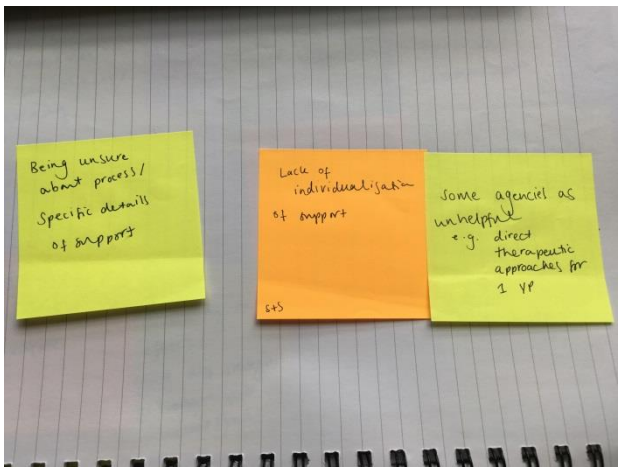


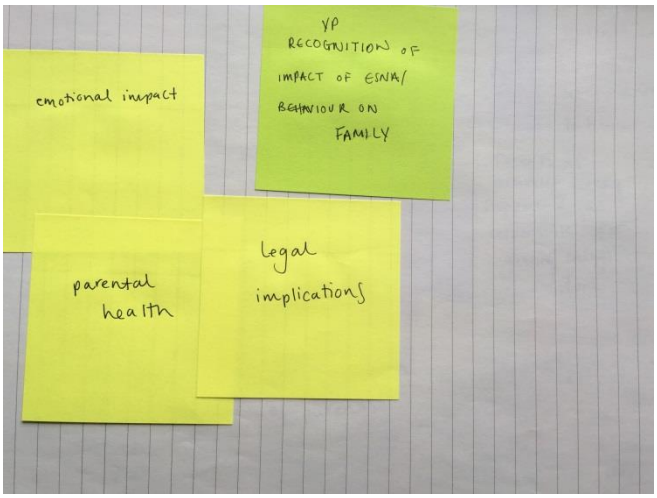


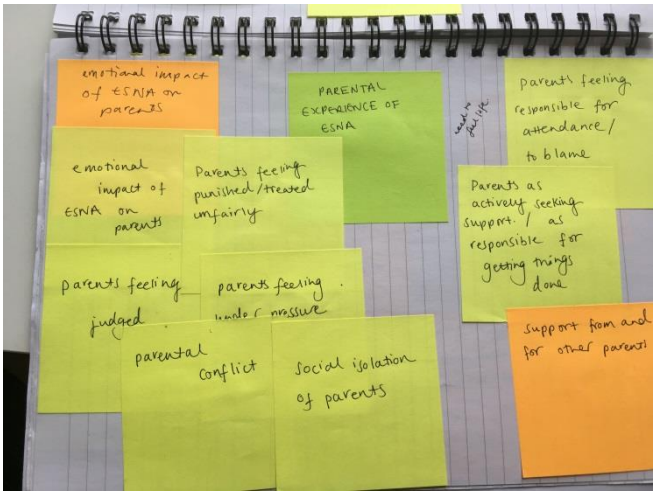


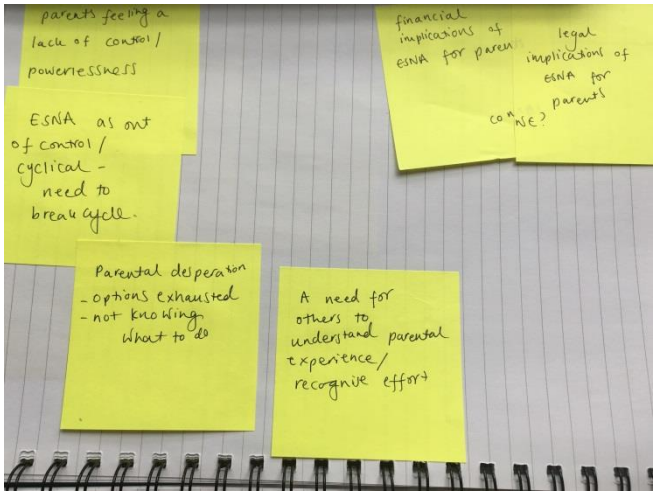

positive experiences w/ sch subjects/ learning
school-based supports
home-sch communication
motivators for Beh-sch-based
Having specific space in sch.
Knowing who to contact in sch
Wanting to ensure security + happiness AT school
Sch putting in effort/
Lack of system for support in school

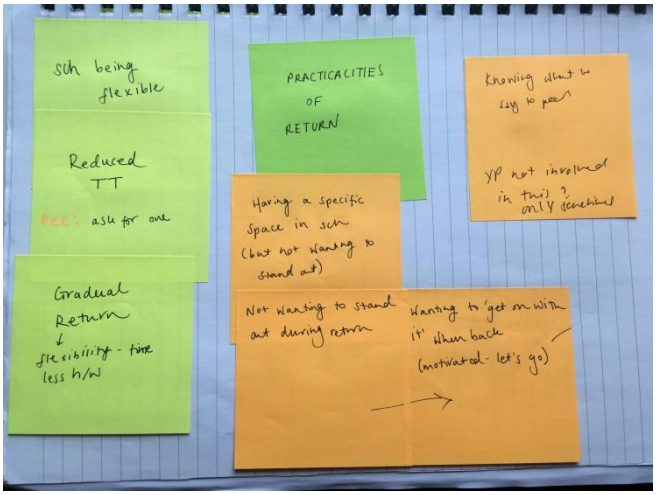

External agencies perceived as main source of support
EXTERNAL AGENCIES
Some agencies difficult to access e.g. without extreme or externalising behaviours
external agencies as supportive
other children are worse than ours
Access to external agencies delayed
lack of sch communication
parental response
Sch providing access to external agencies (rapidly)
our child isn't the only one w/ difficulties
SENCo
LINK resources

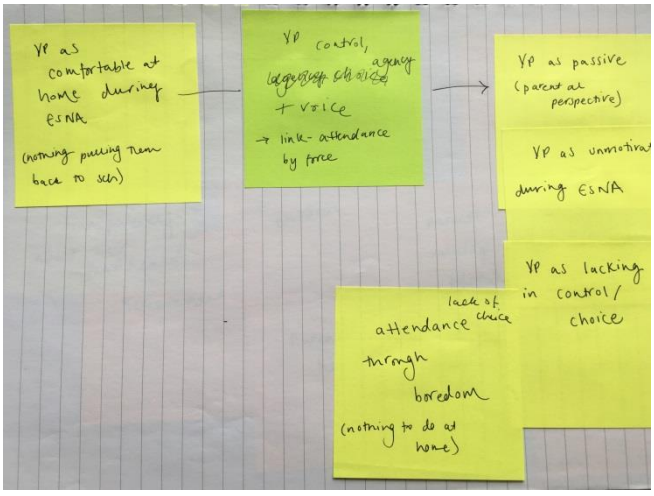

Being unsure about process/ specific details of support
Lack of individualisation of support
SENCo
Some agencies as unhelpful e.g. direct therapeutic approaches for 1 YP

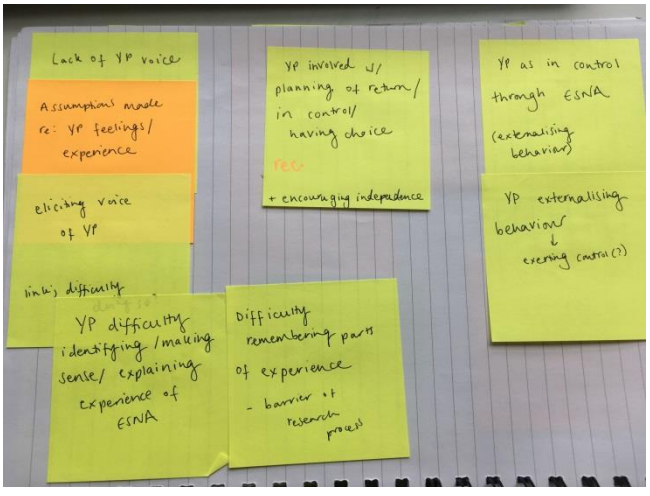

emotional impact
YP RECOGNITION OF IMPACT OF ESNA/ BEHAVIOUR ON FAMILY
parental health
Legal implications


emotional impact of ESNA on parents
PARENTAL EXPERIENCE OF ESNA
Parents feeling responsible for attendance / to blame
emotional impact of ESNA on parents
Parents feeling punished / treated unfairly
Parents as actively seeking support / as responsible for getting things done
parents feeling judged
parents feeling under pressure
parental conflict
Social isolation of parents
support from and for other parents


parents feeling a lack of control / powerlessness
financial implications of ESNA for parents
legal implications of ESNA for parents
ESNA as out of control / cyclical - need to break cycle.
Parental desperation - options exhausted - not knowing what to do
A need for others to understand parental experience / recognise effort


Sch being flexible
PRACTICALITIES OF RETURN
Knowing what to say to peers
Reduced TT
YP not involved in this? only advertised
Having a specific space in sch (but not wanting to stand out)
Gradual Return
flexibility - time less h/w
Not wanting to stand out during return
Wanting to 'get on with it' when back (motivated - let's go)


YP as comfortable at home during ESNA
(nothing pulling them back to sch)
YP control, agency + voice
→ link - attendance by force
YP as passive (parent at perspective)
YP as unmotivated during ESNA
YP as lacking in control / choice
lack of attendance choice through boredom
(nothing to do at home)


Lack of YP voice
YP involved w/ planning of return / in control / having choice
YP as in control through ESNA
(externalising behaviour)
Assumptions made re: YP feelings / experience
+ encouraging independence
YP externalising behaviour ↓ exerting control (?)
eliciting voice of YP
YP difficulty identifying / making sense / explaining experience of ESNA
Difficulty remembering parts of experience
- barrier to research process